

THE CONCRETE FLAMINGO

Jerry Forbes' introduction to murder began innocuously enough, with the puzzling behaviour of the exciting girl on the West Key beach who seemed to be interested in big-game fishing, and wasn't. When Jerry worked out what she was up to, he was more puzzled still, for in fact she was interested in one thing—listening very carefully to his voice. Very soon he found himself involved in a much more murderous—and lucrative—sport than fishing. Marian Forsyth's plan was as deadly as it was brilliant. It called only for a few stage props, including a concrete flamingo, and an actor with an infallible memory. From then on, Harris Chapman, prominent Louisiana businessman, didn't stand a chance.

By the same author:

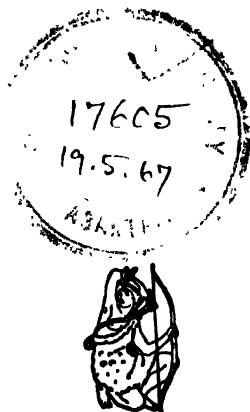
**SCORPION REEF
THE BIG BITE
OPERATOR
STAIN OF SUSPICION
MAN IN MOTION**



**A CRIME CONNOISSEUR
BOOK**

THE CONCRETE FLAMINGO

BY
CHARLES WILLIAMS



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CHAPTER ONE

I WAS talking sailfish with some man from Ohio when I noticed her. I'd just lit a cigarette and had turned to drop the lighter back in the pocket of the terry-cloth robe beside me. She was off to the right and a little behind us, sitting cross-legged on a large beach towel with her face lowered slightly over the book spread open between her knees. At the moment she registered merely as a pair of nice legs and a sleek dark head, but after I'd looked away something about her began to bother me.

'I thought I'd go nuts,' the Ohio man was saying. 'This damn sail must have trailed us a hundred yards. He'd come up behind the bait and follow it like a kitten after a ball of yarn—'

'They'll do that sometimes,' I said. 'Did the skipper try slowing down, and speeding up?'

'Sure. Tried everything. But we never could coax a strike out of him. Finally went down.'

I frowned, thinking of the girl, and turned to shoot another glance at her. Somehow she seemed vaguely familiar, but that still wasn't it exactly. What the devil was it? Then I began to catch on. The pose was phony. She wasn't reading that book; she was listening.

To us? That didn't make sense. What woman would waste her time eavesdropping on a pair of filberts second-guessing a sailfish? But there it was. There were a few sunbathers sprawled around in the vicinity, but ours was the only conversation near enough to be heard. Maybe I was mistaken—No. There was no doubt of it. The little frown of concentration on her face wasn't directed at the book at all, but towards a spot just to the left of it,

towards us. And her eyes didn't move when she turned a page.

Well, maybe she was a screwball, or a fisherman herself. But she didn't appear to fit either category—if they were two categories. I tried to tag her, and the only thing I could come up with was clothes-horse, which was a little on the bizarre side in view of the fact she was about seventy per cent naked at the time. I wondered how a woman could look smart, patrician, and faintly elegant while wearing a bathing suit, and decided it must be the chignon and the beautifully tapered hands.

Or the sun, I thought, or the two Martinis. Knock it off. I shrugged, and went back to the conversation. 'You going out again tomorrow?' I asked the Ohio man.

It was a still and muggy afternoon in early November. The place was Key West, and we were lying on the narrow strip of sand in front of the private beach club to which I'd been given a guest card by the motel where I was staying.

'No,' he said. 'My wife wants to go over to Havana. We're taking the plane in the morning. How about you?'

'I don't know,' I said. 'I was hoping to find somebody to split a charter with.'

'I know what you mean,' he replied. 'It's a shame to have to charter the whole boat when you're alone. Damned expensive, and they fish two lines or four just as easy as one.'

I glanced round at the girl, and a slight movement of her face told me I'd almost caught her looking at me. I was conscious again of the impression I'd seen her before. But where? I'd been so many places the past two weeks they were hard to sort out. It couldn't have been here. This was only the third day I'd been in Key West, and the

other two I'd spent out in the Stream, fishing. Miami Beach? Chicago? Las Vegas?

Maybe if I saw her with her clothes on, it would help. I tried a tailored suit, and one of the new sheath things, and then some hand-knitted jersey, but got no make. Slacks? She wouldn't be caught dead in them, I decided; women who could wear slacks never did.

The Ohio man looked at his watch and stood up, brushing sand from his thick-set body. 'I've got to get back and start packing. Take it easy, pal.'

He departed. The girl went on staring at the pages of her book. Far out, a westbound tanker hugged the edge of the reef to avoid the current of the Stream. I'd better start packing myself, I thought, and get out of Key West. I had to come up with something pretty soon; in another week or ten days I'd be broke. Sooner, if I spent any more on fishing trips.

I wondered about the girl again. Propping myself on an elbow, I glanced round at her. 'What's the world record for dolphin?'

I expected a blank stare, of course, or one right out of the deep freeze, but instead she said calmly, without even looking up, 'Hmmm. Just a moment.' She leafed back through the book and ran her finger down a column. 'Seventy-five and a half pounds. It was taken off East Africa.'

It caught me completely off-balance. She glanced up finally. Her eyes were a very dark blue, almost violet, in a thin but fine-boned face. They regarded me with urbane coolness, but then amusement got the upper hand. 'All right. I *was* listening.'

I sat up and slid over by her. Picking up the book, I glanced at the jacket. It was a volume on salt-water fishing. 'I wouldn't have said you were a fisherman.'

She reached for the packet of cigarettes at her side. When I held the lighter, she smiled at me over the flame. 'I'm not, as a matter of fact. If you'd asked me for the world's record Striped Limbo, I'd still have tried to look it up.'

'Then why the book?' I asked. 'Your boy friend a fisherman?'

She shook her head. 'No, it's not that. I just wanted to try it.'

'Why?' I asked. She still didn't look like an outdoor type.

'A man I used to work for. He talked so much about marlin and sailfish I decided if I ever had a chance I'd see what the attraction was. Maybe you could tell me something about the boats.'

'Sure,' I said. 'The charter fleet ties up over in Garrison Bight. Along Roosevelt Boulevard, I think it is. Most of them charge sixty a day, but a few are higher. The only one I've fished with is Captain Holt, of the *Blue Runner*. He's good, and so is his Mate; they'll put you into fish if anybody will. He charges sixty-five.'

'They're rather expensive, aren't they?'

'Nothing's ever cheap about boats,' I said. 'And don't forget you're hiring two men all day, plus gasoline, tackle, bait, and so on. Plus a lot of skill you can get only with experience. Are you alone?'

While I was speaking I noticed the same intent expression on her face I'd seen before. It puzzled me. 'Oh,' she said abruptly, as if she'd been thinking of something else. 'I—yes, I'm alone.'

'Well, look,' I said, 'if you want to go out tomorrow, why don't we team up? It's a lot less expensive—thirty-two dollars fifty apiece.'

She appeared to think about it. 'We-ell——'

'Come on, I'll buy you a drink,' I told her. 'We can talk it over.'

She smiled. 'All right.' I helped her up, and gathered up her towel and my robe. She was a little over average height, I noted, and very slender. Too slender, I thought, to attract much attention among all the stacked and sun-gilded flesh lying around on Florida beaches, but she was smart-looking and exquisitely feminine and she moved nicely. She appeared to be around thirty.

The bar was located on a screened porch at one end of the dining-room. It was empty at the moment except for the white-jacketed barman and two men arguing about the Detroit Lions. We sat down at one of the small tables along the screened wall facing the beach. The barman came over. She ordered a Scotch on the rocks, and I asked for a Martini. A big fan in the corner blew humid air across us.

'My name's George Hamilton,' I said.

She dropped the book on a chair beside her. 'Forsyth. Marian Forsyth. How do you do, Mr. Hamilton?'

'Have you been here long?'

'Just two days,' she replied.

'You know, I keep thinking I've seen you somewhere before.'

Again I was conscious of the urbane amusement in the eyes. 'Really? I thought we had by-passed that one.'

'No,' I said. 'It's on the level. There is something familiar about you. Where are you staying?'

'The Hibiscus Motel, just up the street.'

'Then we're neighbours. I'm there too.'

'That might have been where you saw me. In the lobby, perhaps.'

'I suppose so,' I said. 'But I don't see why I'd be so hazy about it. You're quite striking, you know. I mean,

the Black Irish colouring, and the classic line of that hair-do. It sings.'

She propped her elbows on the table, with her chin on her laced fingers, and smiled. 'And what other personality problems do you have, Mr. Hamilton, besides shyness?'

I grinned. 'I'm sorry. Seriously, though, if any Charles or Antoine ever tries to tout off that chignon, shoot him.'

'That seems a little drastic, doesn't it? But—if you insist.' Then she added, 'Incidentally, I'm not Irish. I'm Scottish. My maiden name was Forbes.'

I was reaching for cigarettes in the pocket of the robe, which was on the chair beside me. When I glanced up at her, there was nothing in her face but that same cool good humour. 'Oh?' I said. Then I remarked, 'I didn't know you were married.' She wore no ring.

'I'm divorced,' she said. 'Where are you from, Mr. Hamilton?'

The barman brought over the drinks. 'Texas,' I told her.

She took a sip of the Scotch and looked at me thoughtfully. 'I'd never have known it. You don't sound a bit like a Texan.'

'I'm not a professional,' I said. 'It's a fallacy, anyway. All Texans don't go around saying "Howdy, pardner".'

'Yes, I know. I'm from Louisiana, myself. But I do have a pretty fair ear for accents. You've lost yours entirely.'

'I never really had one,' I said. 'But while we're on this Professor 'Iggins kick, you can spot it if you listen closely. I still boot one occasionally. *Thanksgiving*, for instance. And *afternoon*. That over-stressed first syllable is pure Texan.'

She nodded. 'And Southern. You must have a good ear yourself.'

I shrugged. 'I had a little speech training. At one time I was going to be an actor.'

She regarded me with interest. 'But you're not in show business?'

'No,' I said. 'Advertising. But how about the fishing? Do you want to try it?'

'Oh, yes. Very much. But I'm not sure yet I can make it tomorrow. Could I let you know tonight?'

'Sure,' I said. 'Why don't we have dinner together?'

She smiled. 'I'm afraid I couldn't, tonight. But thanks, anyway. Suppose I call you around ten or eleven. Will you be in then?'

I said yes. She asked several more questions about fishing, refused the offer of another drink, and left to go back to the motel. I swam for a while, wondering about her. I couldn't place her at all. Was she really interested in fishing, or was she just a girl away from home looking for a little fun? If the latter, I thought, she had a very cool approach to it. I wondered if she had money. A bathing suit revealed a lot of interesting statistical data, but it didn't say a damn thing when it came to financial status.

I was lying in bed around eleven reading *The Hidden Persuaders* when the phone rang. 'Well, I can go,' she said eagerly.

'That's great. Here's hoping you land a sail.'

'I just hope we can still get a boat. Do you think they'll all be taken?'

'No,' I said. 'It's the off-season. And I've already talked to Holt; he's open tomorrow. I'll call now and confirm.'

'I hate to keep bothering you with questions,' she

apologized, 'but what shall I take? What time do we leave, and how long are we out?'

'What room are you in?' I asked. 'If you're dressed, I could come over——'

The brush was polite, but firm. She was about to go to bed. She repeated the questions.

'Hat, or fishing cap,' I said. 'Long sleeves, dark glasses, tan lotion. That sun is murder. We'll leave the dock at eight, and come in around four-thirty or five. They furnish the tackle; all we have to bring is our lunch. There's a restaurant on Roosevelt that'll be open. I don't have a car, but I'll call a cab——'

'I have one,' she interrupted. 'I'll meet you in the parking area behind the motel at seven-thirty. Will that be all right?'

'Fine,' I said.

'Just one other thing,' she asked. 'Could you tell me what the outriggers are for?'

I wondered why she wanted to go into that in the middle of the night over the phone, but shrugged. She seemed to have an insatiable curiosity about the mechanics of big-game fishing.

'They serve several purposes,' I told her. 'The line is run out from your rod tip and trolled from the end of the outrigger, clipped in a gizmo like a big clothes-pin. Takes the load off your arms, for one thing. And it's springy on the end, so it gives the bait a good action. But the big reason, of course, is the automatic dropback when a sailfish strikes. I suppose the book told you that a billfish of any kind always stuns his bait before he takes it in his mouth. So when he raps it with that bill, it snaps the line off the outrigger; that releases about twenty feet of slack, and the bait stops dead in the water. Just as if it had been alive and he'd killed it.'

'I see,' she said thoughtfully. 'Well, thank you very much, Mr. Hamilton. I'm looking forward to it, and I'll see you in the morning.'

After she'd hung up I lay there thinking about her, studying the whole thing a little warily. She didn't ring true, somehow. Then I dismissed the worry. Hell, she couldn't possibly know me, and I was three thousand miles from Las Vegas. The prospect of another fishing trip was irresistible, anyway, and she might turn out to be a very interesting deal. I don't get you at all, Mrs. Forsyth, but you're beginning to intrigue me. We'll see what we can find out tomorrow.

It wasn't much—at least, not to begin with. And then when I finally did figure out what she was doing, she puzzled me even more.

It was a beautiful day. When I awoke it was a little after seven and already full daylight inside the room. I crossed to the window and parted the slats of the closed venetian blind. The sky was clear, and fronds of the coconut palms in the courtyard between the two wings of the motel stirred gently in a light breeze that appeared to be from the south or south-east. The Stream would be in lovely shape. I was eager to be under way. When I'd shaved and showered, and emerged from the room with the beach bag containing glasses, fishing cap, tan lotion, and cigarettes, she was just coming out of No. 17, diagonally across from me. She had on a conical straw hat, blue Bermuda shorts, and a simple blouse with long sleeves, and was carrying a big purse. She waved and smiled. 'Good morning, Mr. Hamilton.'

I learned nothing from the car. As the great American status symbol it was useless, because it wasn't hers; it was a hire job she'd picked up at the airport in Miami. She

was wearing a watch, however, that had cost at least five hundred. She didn't have much to say while we were eating breakfast, and afterwards, while we were running out to the Stream with the engines hooked up, talking was difficult because of their noise. We sat forward under the canopy to avoid the tatters of spray flung backward as the *Blue Runner* knifed into the light ground-swell at top cruising speed.'

'Is it always this noisy?' she asked, having to raise her voice.

I shook my head. 'Just while we're running out. When we start fishing, we troll on one engine, throttled down. Hardly any noise at all.'

'Oh,' she said, as if relieved.

The boat was a thirty-five-foot sports fisherman with topside controls and big outriggers capable of bouncing a marlin bait. Holt kept her in superb condition so her white topsides sparkled in the sun. He and his Mate were both taciturn types whose sole interest in life was fishing. They were good, too. I'd enjoyed fishing with them.

It was a few minutes before nine and Key West was down on the horizon when we crossed the edge of the Stream shortly to the south and east of Sand Key light. It was beautiful, running dark as indigo in a ragged line beyond the reefs with just enough breeze to ripple the light ground-swell rolling up from the south-east. The *Blue Runner* slowed, and Sam the Mate came down from topside. He swung out the outriggers, nodded for Mrs. Forsyth to take the port chair, and put out her line, baited with balao. She watched as he clipped it to the outrigger halyard and ran it out to the end. He fitted the butt of the rod into the gimbal in her chair.

She took it and looked round at me. 'Now what do I do?'

Normally I detest people who want to talk when I'm fishing, but this was different. I was curious about her, and becoming more so all the time. 'Just watch your bait,' I said. 'You see it? A little to your right, and about seventy-five feet back?'

She looked. It skipped across the surface momentarily, and slid under again, fluttering. 'Yes. I can see it now.'

'Keep your eye on it,' I said. 'Watch it every minute—'

She nodded. 'That's so I'll know when I get a bite?'

I restrained an impulse to wince. 'Strike,' I said. 'These fish out here don't nibble; they hit. But that's not the reason for watching it. You'll know when you get a strike, whether you see it or not. Sam or the Skipper will tell you, for one thing. Sam'll be standing up in back of the chair, and the Skipper's topside, so they can both see down into the water better than we can because our angle's too flat and there's more defraction. They'll always see the fish before you will, and they'll generally know what it is by the time it hits. But if you *don't* see it, you're losing half the fun of this type of fishing. The strike is the big thrill. It's like dry-fly fishing, on a magnified scale.'

I glanced at her. She was wearing dark glasses now, so I couldn't see her eyes, but I had that feeling I'd had the other times that she was hanging onto every word with rapt attention. Sam handed me the other rod. I threw the reel on free spool and thumbed it lightly while he ran the line up the outrigger. For the time I forgot her, watching my own bait with the old eager anticipation while we trolled quietly. The sun was hot. Flying fish skittered out of the blue side of a swell. A tanker in ballast went past to seaward, rocking us in its wake.

Water boiled under my bait, and there was a slight click as the line snapped off the outrigger.

'Mackerel,' Holt said laconically.

I lowered the rod tip till the slack was gone, and then raised it, setting the hook. It was a small one, not over three pounds. 'Good marlin bait,' Sam said, as he grasped the leader and dropped it in the box. I glanced at Mrs. Forsyth. She was lighting a cigarette. The fish appeared to bore her. Well, it wasn't much of a fish.

An hour went by. I landed a barracuda of about fifteen pounds, and then a bonito that came in badly slashed by barracuda. She had no action at all, but she didn't appear to mind. She seemed to be lost in thought. We went on trolling. I watched my bait.

'Bird,' Sam said behind us.

'I see him,' Holt replied. The beat of the engine picked up, and we swung in a sharp turn.

Mrs. Forsyth glanced round at me. 'We aren't going to chase birds, are we?'

'Man-o'-war,' I said. 'A frigate bird.' I stood up and looked forward, and spotted him. He was about a half-mile ahead, off the starboard bow. She stuck her rod in the holder on the rail and came over to look too.

'When you see one hovering like that,' I told her, 'he's usually following a fish——'

'Why?' she asked.

'Table scraps,' I explained. 'When the fish locates a school of bait and starts to feed, he drives them to the surface. That gives the bird a chance at 'em.'

She nodded. 'I see.'

Captain Holt was starting forward. 'Probably dolphin,' he said. 'I see some dunnage.'

'How about taking it on the port side?' I asked.

'Sure.'

'Get set,' I told Mrs. Forsyth. She sat down in the chair and I fitted the rod into the gimbal for her. 'There's a big plank up ahead, and we're going to pass it on your side. If he hits, lower your rod and reel in till the slack's gone, and then strike once by raising the tip——'

'How do they know it's a dolphin?' she asked, watching me with that intent expression on her face.

'They don't actually,' I said. 'It's just an educated guess. Dolphin like to lie under anything floating on the surface.'

We came abeam of the plank, and then it began to drop astern. I stood up to watch. Her bait fluttered past it, started to draw away.

'Here he comes!' Holt said tersely.

It was one of those moments that'd still give you a thrill if you fished for a hundred years. I saw the blue bolt of flame under the surface, and then he came clear, quartering and behind the bait, a bull of eighteen or twenty pounds flashing green and gold and blue in the sunlight, and took the bait going down. Her line snapped off the outrigger. I hoped he wouldn't take mine too. Sometimes they will—take both baits in one blinding strike so fast you think you've hooked two separate dolphin all at the same instant.

He didn't. He took only hers, set the hook himself when she forgot to hit him, leaped, made one fast, slashing run, leaped three more times, and was gone. She reeled in. Sam looked at the leader. 'Kink,' he said.

'What did I do wrong?' she asked, casually taking cigarettes from the breast pocket of her blouse.

'Nothing,' I said.

'But he got away.'

I was beginning to get it now, though it made no sense at all. The whole thing had bored her profoundly and she

didn't mind in the slightest that she'd lost the fish, but she wanted me to explain why.

I explained. 'When he was jumping, he threw a kink in the leader. Wire'll always break if it kinks. It happens to everybody.'

'Oh,' she said thoughtfully.

She wasn't interested in fishing, and never had been. She was listening to my voice.

There was no possible explanation for it, but I knew I was right. I watched her closely the rest of the day, checking it, and found that whenever I was talking, no matter what the subject, she listened in that same way. She said nothing about herself except that she was the private secretary to a businessman in a small town named Thomaston in central Louisiana. It might even be true, I thought, in spite of the expensive watch. She could have presents like that any time she wanted them. There was no longer any doubt that fishing bored her. She raised a sail, and lost it, with no more interest than she'd shown in the dolphin. I hooked up with a six-foot sail, and landed it; it wasn't badly hurt and there was little blood, so we released it. That was it for the day, except for two or three small dolphin and another bonito. We were back at the dock at four forty-five.

We paid Holt, and I drove her car back to the motel. Outside No. 17, she held out her hand and smiled. 'It's been wonderful. I enjoyed every minute of it.'

'Would you like to go out again tomorrow?' I asked.

'I'd rather not take that much sun again so soon.'

'How about dinner tonight?'

I got the same cool, polite brush. 'Really, I couldn't. But thank you just the same.'

I went back to my own room. After I'd showered and changed into grey flannel slacks and a light sports shirt,

I sat down in front of the air-conditioner with a cigarette and went back over the whole thing from the time I'd noticed she was eavesdropping. She'd looked me over and dropped me. Why? And what had she really wanted? An adventure, an interlude, a break? Whatever it was, I'd failed to measure up somewhere. Well, you couldn't win 'em all. The phone rang.

'I'm just stirring some Martinis,' she said warmly. 'Why 'don't you come over, Mr. Hamilton, and have one with me to celebrate your sailfish?'

You never know, I thought; maybe that's why they're so fascinating. 'Love to,' I said. I dropped the phone back in the cradle and was out the door in two strides.

I knocked on No. 17, and stepped inside. She'd changed into a plicated black skirt and white blouse, and was very smart and very, very attractive from the sling pumps to the sleek dark head. There was a bucket of ice on the glass top of the dresser, and she was stirring Martinis in a pitcher.

She turned and smiled. 'Do sit down, Mr. Forbes.'

CHAPTER TWO

THE way she said it told me there was no point in trying to bluff. I stepped inside and closed the door. Her room was exactly the same as mine, furnished with a brown carpet and curtains, twin beds with yellow spreads, a dresser, and a glass-covered desk at the right of the door. The telephone was located on the desk, and beside it—almost under my hand—were two sheets of motel stationery covered with the slashes and pot-hooks of shorthand. Two names were spelled out in the message; one of them was Murray, and the other Forbes.

I glanced up at her. 'You just got this?'

She nodded coolly, and poured the Martinis. 'Just a few minutes ago.'

'But you knew who I was all the time? You practically told me there in the bar.'

She smiled. 'I couldn't resist it; you were so insufferably smug. And I wanted to see how you'd react.'

'Are you from the police?'

'Of course not,' she said. She handed me the Martini, and picked up her own. 'Here's to your sailfish. Or should we drink to Mr. Murray's durability, or the high cost of extradition?'

'What about Murray?' I demanded.

'Haven't you heard?'

'How could I? I was afraid to call anybody on the Coast. And there was no mention of it in the papers I could get.'

'Then you were still afraid you'd killed him?'

I took a sip of the drink; I needed it. 'No. I assumed he

was tougher than that. But felonious assault is pretty damn serious itself. What do you know about it?

'Would you hand me those notes, please?'

I took them off the desk and passed them to her, so completely at sea now I didn't feel anything at all. She walked around between the beds and sat down on the farther one with a leg doubled under her and the pleated skirt spread carefully over her knees. Taking a sip of the "Martini, she said, 'Hmmm,' as she studied the shorthand. Then she put her drink down on the night table and groped for a cigarette. I held the lighter for her. She smiled, and nodded to the armchair near the end of the bed. 'Please sit down.'

'What about Murray?' I said impatiently.

'Broken jaw,' she said, consulting her notes. 'Mild concussion. Something or other to the something sinus—ethmoid, I think. Scalp lacerations. Various minor injuries. A hundred and fifty dollars' damages to his camera and possibly two hundred to the furnishings of a motel room. He's recovering satisfactorily, and the woman's husband appears to have used a little influence to smooth it over and keep it hushed up. You might go to jail for any one of half a dozen misdemeanours if they could get their hands on you, but there's no felony charge. Nothing they would extradite you for.'

I sighed with relief.

'You apparently don't care much for private detectives.'

'I can contain my enthusiasm for them,' I said. 'Snoopy bastards. I had to have that film, anyway; and since I didn't know how to get into a Speed Graphic, I opened it on his head.'

'You were lucky it was no worse.'

I lit a cigarette. 'Would you mind telling me who you are, and just what this is all about?'

'I've already told you who I am,' she replied, taking a sip of her drink. 'Mrs. Marian Forsyth.'

'And you're a private secretary to some businessman in Louisiana,' I said. 'Don't give me that.'

'I am,' she said. 'Or was, rather. However, let me finish this dossier. Correct me if there are any errors. Your full name is Jerome Langston Forbes, you're usually called Jerry, you're twenty-eight, and you *are* from Texas—at least, originally. You're single. You drink moderately but you gamble too much, and at least twice you've been involved in a messy affair with a married woman. You attended Rice Institute and the University of Texas, but didn't graduate from either. I believe it was some trouble over a crap game at Rice, and you left the University of Texas to go into the Navy during the Korean war. You don't appear to be the plodding type of wage-earner, to say the least. Since your discharge from the service in nineteen fifty-three you've owned a bar in Panama, written advertising copy for two or three San Francisco agencies, been a race-track tout, and at the time you got into this brawl in Las Vegas you were doing publicity for some exhibitionist used-car dealer in Los Angeles. Is that fairly accurate?'

'Except for a minor point,' I said. 'I wasn't the race-track tout; I was the man behind him. I made him. It was a public-relations deal. But never mind that. How'd you find out all this?'

She smiled. 'You'll love this. From a private detective.'

'But for God's sake *why*? And where was it I saw you before?'

'Miami Beach,' she said. 'Six days ago.'

'Oh. Then you were staying——'

She nodded. 'At that same Byzantine confection you were. The Golden Horn.'

The Golden Horn was one of those chi-chi motels in the north end of Miami Beach that really aren't motels at all except that you can park your own car if you want. I didn't have a car, of course; I'd stayed out there merely because they were less expensive than the big places. I thought of it now, trying to remember when I'd seen her.

'It was by the pool,' she said. 'You were trying to pick up some girl from—Richmond, I believe.'

I frowned. 'I remember the girl, all right. Silver blonde with a seven-word vocabulary. Priceless, hilarious, hysterical—I can't remember the other four. But I don't know why I'm so vague about seeing you. As attractive—'

'Competition, perhaps,' she said. 'The pool side is not my terrain. Nor the beach. I'm too thin.'

'You're entitled to your own opinions,' I said. 'Don't try to brain-wash me. I still say I'd have noticed you. I could spot the line of that head a hundred yards—'

'I had my hair up, and I was wearing a swimming cap,' she said crisply. 'Now, if we're through discussing my visibility, or lack of it, would you care to know what I was doing?'

'That one I've already figured out. You were listening.'

She gave me an approving glance. 'Right.'

'But why? What was it about my voice? If you're a talent scout for Decca, I can't sing a note.'

'For the moment, let's just say your voice has a certain unique quality that interests me. And it might make you a great deal of money.'

'How?' I asked.

'I can't tell you right now; maybe I won't at all. I don't know. But at any rate you know now why I started

investigating you—especially after I began to suspect your name wasn't really George Hamilton.'

'What tipped you off about that?' I asked. 'I thought I was pretty careful.'

'Pure chance,' she replied. 'It just happened there was a man named Forbes registered there at the same time——'

'Oh,' I said. 'Sure. I remember now. And he was paged, there by the pool. But, dammit, I wouldn't have believed it was that obvious.'

'It wasn't,' she replied. 'On the contrary, you recovered beautifully. I wouldn't have noticed it if I hadn't been looking right at you. Naturally it made me wonder, since I'd just heard you tell the girl your name was Hamilton. I don't remember whether that was before or after you told her your father was Chairman of the Board of Inland Steel.'

'It was a waste of breath,' I said. 'She was a girl who liked to strike closer to the source. She collected the board chairmen themselves. But what did you do then?'

She finished her drink and started to get up. 'Let me,' I said, and refilled the glasses with what was left in the pitcher. I sat down again. 'Go on.'

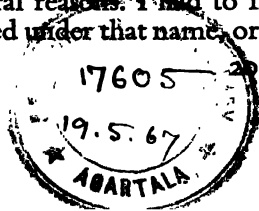
'I went up to my room,' she said. 'It was on the second floor, overlooking the patio and the pool, and I could watch you from the window. I called the desk and asked them to page Mr. Hamilton.'

'Oh. I remember that call. So you were the mixed-up type from Eastern Airlines that kept insisting she'd found the luggage I hadn't even lost?'

She nodded coolly. 'That's right.'

'Why?'

'Several reasons. I had to find out if you really were registered under that name, or just lying to the girl on the



grounds that you should always lie to girls. And I wanted to hear your voice over the telephone——'

'And that was the same deal last night?' I interrupted. 'I mean, when you asked all those questions about fishing, over the phone?'

'Of course.' She gestured impatiently with a slim hand. 'But to get back—primarily, I wanted to watch you while you were being paged.'

'I see.' This girl was clever. 'And I flunked?'

'You flunked. The boy called you three times from the other end of the pool before you remembered who you were.'

'Well, there was an awful lot of blonde extruded from that bathing suit——'

'I allowed for a certain amount of preoccupation. But your subconscious should have been on duty, anyway. It was fairly obvious you hadn't been Mr. Hamilton for very long.'

I nodded. 'So then you put the private snoops on me? You know, sometimes I get the impression I'm a kind of backlog for the whole damned industry.'

'Well, perhaps if you behaved yourself——'

'If you're referring to this last deal,' I said, 'the woman told me she was separated from her husband. What was I supposed to do, get an affidavit? But never mind that. How did the snoops find out where to dig? After I rocked that one up with his camera, I was running scared, believe me; he didn't seem to be the healthiest. I think I used three different names from Las Vegas to Los Angeles International to Chicago to Miami, and I registered from San Antonio, Texas.'

'It was quite simple,' she said. 'I got your correct name and your Los Angeles address off an old credit card.'

'What?'

'When you try to change your identity, you should clean out your wallet.'

'I don't leave my wallet lying around——

'No. But you don't take it in swimming with you, either.'

I was beginning to feel like an absolute chump. This girl had picked me to pieces as if I'd been an oaf at a county fair.

'Listen,' I said, almost angrily, 'I know I'm not that stupid. When I was in the pool or on the beach, it was in my room. And the room was locked.'

'I know,' she said. 'But you have a bad habit of not turning the key in at the desk. And the next afternoon you went swimming off the beach. Remember? I merely took the key from the pocket of your wrap and went up to the room.'

I shook my head. 'You've got a really cold nerve. Don't you know that's a serious offence, whether you took anything or not?'

'There was really no risk,' she said. 'Your room overlooked the beach, so I could see you out there. And the whole thing didn't take five minutes.'

'You don't let anything stop you, do you? So then what?'

'That was when I called the detective agency. They put their Los Angeles office on it, and when you checked out of the Golden Horn they told me where you were staying down here. I came down. I wanted to keep in contact, and perhaps meet you, but not commit myself until I received the report from California and learned a little about you. When we came in a while ago, I called Miami. They'd heard from the West Coast at last, and they gave me the report over the phone. Parts of it were quite interesting, so I called you to come over.'

'What do you want?' I asked.

'Primarily, to know quite a bit more about you. What are your plans?'

'I don't know,' I said. 'If your information's accurate, I suppose I can go back to my right name and start looking for a job. Probably in New York.'

'How much money do you have?'

'Little over four hundred.'

'That's not much. And good jobs aren't easy to find at twenty-eight with your record of moving around. Let me make you an offer.'

'Go ahead.'

'Put it off for a few days. I have a proposition in mind, but I can't tell you what it is until I'm sure of several things. You don't stand to lose anything; if nothing comes of it, you'll still have your four hundred dollars. I'll make up anything you've spent.'

'What kind of proposition?' I asked.

'I'd rather not say yet. But how would you like to go back to Miami Beach?'

'When?' I asked.

She stood up. 'Right now. I'm expecting some very important mail, and I have to do some shopping in the morning, so I thought we'd drive up tonight.'

I rose. 'Sounds fine to me.' Then I took hold of her arms, and said, 'In fact, I've just had a wonderful idea——'

The blue eyes were coolly satirical. 'That I don't doubt in the slightest. No.'

'But you haven't even heard it——'

'I don't have to. But it just happens I still have my room at the Golden Horn, and that I'm expecting the mail there, under my own name. I'd suggest you re-register as George Hamilton; after all, they'll probably remember you.'

‘But——’

‘I’ll drop you in downtown Miami Beach, and you can take a cab. I’d rather no one knew of our relationship.’

‘Relationship,’ I said. ‘Hah!’

She smiled, but said nothing.

We’d stopped for dinner in Marathon, so it was shortly after eleven when she let me off in Miami Beach. ‘I’ll see you in the morning,’ she said. ‘Call me in room three-one-six.’

‘Sure,’ I replied. I carried the bag into a bar and killed about ten minutes over a drink before I called a cab and went out to the Golden Horn. It’s still slow in the Miami area in November, so I wasn’t worried about getting a room. It turned out I could have one fronting the ocean if I wanted. ‘Third floor, if possible,’ I said.

I signed the registry card and followed the boy across the corner of the patio court, past the illuminated pool and palms bearing clusters of coloured lights. We entered a corridor in the left wing and took an elevator to the third floor.

312 was round the corner from her room. It was like the one I’d had before, with turquoise walls and beige carpet and an oversized bed. The bedspread was persimmon, as were the floor-to-ceiling curtains covering the bay window at the far end. The bath had a tub and stall shower and was finished in persimmon tile. The boy put the bag on the luggage stand beside the dresser over on the right, adjusted the air-conditioner thermostat, thanked me for the tip, and left. I waited three minutes before I stepped down the corridor and knocked on 316. The door opened slightly and she looked out round the edge of it.

‘I might have known,’ she said.

‘I just thought of several more things I should tell you

about myself,' I replied. 'It was in Panama I first became interested in big-game fishing——'

'I see. And you're afraid you might forget them before morning?'

'They might be lost for ever. But I don't have to come in; I can tell you from out here in the corridor. Or through the door.'

She sighed. I couldn't tell whether she was really angry or not. 'Just a moment.' She disappeared. I heard a rustling sound, and then she pulled the door open and I stepped inside. She closed it. Her room was the same layout and colour scheme. She'd scrubbed off what make-up she'd been wearing, even the lipstick, and had on a rather conservative nightgown under the *négligé* she was struggling with, but she was unbelievably exciting. I didn't know why.

'Mostly trivial,' I said. 'But revealing. For instance, when I was a kid, all the other slobbs put their money in the Christmas Club, but I kept mine in a regular account. Got two per cent.'

'You don't have to hit me over the head,' she replied. I kissed her. This was even more exciting, in spite of the fact she obviously didn't care whether it was or not. She finally broke it up, but she said, 'All right.' It was rather the way you'd buy a potato peeler from a salesman to get rid of him, but by this time I didn't even care what the terms were.

She was smooth, deft, experienced, and agreeably co-operative about the whole thing. I lay there afterwards in the annealed and quiescent dark trying to pin down her exact attitude, and decided the word I was looking for was pleasant. That was it. She was quite pleasant about it—the perfect hostess, in fact.

She said something, but I missed it. I was still thinking about her, trying to remember exactly what she looked like——

'You're not even listening,' she said.

'What?'

'Speech. It may have escaped your attention, but for a long time now people have been able to communicate——'

'Oh. I'm sorry. What was it?'

'You mentioned acting. Was that by any chance the truth?'

'Yes. But just amateur. In school. I never did try to turn pro; not enough talent.'

'Were you a fast study?'

'Fairly so,' I said. 'I usually knew my lines by the time we finished the first rehearsal. For some reason I learn fast, or easily. Just luck, I suppose.'

'Tell me about your family.'

'I'm it, except for my step-father. My mother and father were divorced when I was about five. He was a geologist; spent most of his time in South America, usually at high altitudes. My mother wouldn't live up there. He was killed the next summer; a station wagon he was riding in went off the road into a gorge. My mother remarried a couple of years afterwards. Widower several years older than she was, partner in a Houston brokerage firm. He's retired now, lives on a big place near Huntsville and raises Black Angus cattle. My mother died while I was at sea, during the Korean thing. She left me a little money; that's when I bought the bar in Panama.'

'What happened to the bar?'

'It was put out-of-bounds for military personnel because of a couple of bad fights, so I sold it.'

'At a loss?'

'No. I was lucky. This live one was fresh from the States and didn't know what out-of-bounds meant down there. I think he wanted to make it a fag hangout, anyway.'

'What did you do with the money when you got back to the States?'

'Lost most of it in Las Vegas.'

'Tell me about the tout business.'

I reached over and turned on the reading lamp on the night table. She looked at me questioningly. 'What's that for?'

'I don't know,' I said. 'I just got tired of talking to you in the dark. I wanted to look at you.'

'Why?'

'Tell me,' I said. I raised myself on an elbow and ran a finger-tip along the line of her cheek. 'You're beautiful. Is that it?'

'Don't be silly.'

'I was never less silly. How about striking? Exciting? It's a quality of some kind—fragile, elegant, cool, hard-boiled, and sexy—all at the same time. There's no such combination? I was afraid not.'

She shook her head with exasperation, but she did smile. 'Oh, for heaven's sake. And I had some weird idea I was going to talk to you——'

'I am talking.'

'Like an idiot. Why the campaign; you're already here, aren't you?'

'Don't be so cynical.'

'Turn out the light.'

I turned it out, and took her in my arms and kissed her. She came to me readily, and was as deftly and pleasantly co-operative as before. If that was the only way to

achieve a calm and rational conversation, by God she was willing.

'What about the tout business?' she asked after a while.

'It was nothing,' I said. 'You know how they operate. You've seen 'em by the dozens passing out their sheets at the entrance to racetracks—Clocker Joe, Stablehand Maguire, Exercise Boy—no imagination, competing with each other, and working for buttons. So I made a deal with this one; I'd put him in the big time for half the take. We set it up as a telegraphic service and I bought time on a Tijuana radio station to sell him—a real saturation build-up about the time Santa Anita was opening. Lot of spot announcements and a quarter-hour of hillbilly junk with a plug every minute or two. That's about all there was to it, besides convincing him he had to raise his prices. Obviously, nobody has any confidence in a cheap tip on a horse race; you've got to charge plenty to be good. We were splitting two thousand a week for a while.'

'What happened?'

'He couldn't stand prosperity; turned out to be a lush. Kept getting his records all fouled up so he couldn't remember who got the winners yesterday. And you're dead without records, obviously.'

'I see,' she said thoughtfully.

I woke once during the night. She was lying quite still beside me, but after a while I began to suspect she was awake. I put my hand on her thigh. It was tense and rigid. Her arms felt the same way, and when I slid my hand down to hers, lying at her side, I found it was clenched into a fist.

'What's the matter?' I asked.

She made no reply. I asked again. She still said nothing. I gave up, and after a while I went back to sleep.

CHAPTER THREE

WHEN I awoke it was after eight. I groped for a cigarette, lit it, and turned to look at her. She was sleeping quietly with the dark hair like spilled ink across the pillow. She had the flat stomach and narrow hips of a fashion model and rather small breasts that were spread out and flattened as she lay on her back. I looked at the slender patrician face with the long lashes like soot against her skin; it was a wilful face, I thought, and it just escaped being bony, but the bones were good. She was no pin-up, but she reminded me of something very thin and expensive that was made before good workmanship went out of style. I wondered what she wanted.

Her bag was on the dresser; it might tell me something, I thought. I went over and opened it. A thin folder held eleven \$100 Express cheques. I pulled out the wallet and checked her driver's licence. What little she'd told me about herself appeared to be the truth. *Mrs. Marion Forsyth*, it said, *714 Beauregard Drive, Thomaston, La. Hair, black. Eyes, blue. 5'-7". 112 pounds. Born 8 November, 1923.* She'd be thirty-four in a few days. This surprised me; I wouldn't have thought she was over twenty-nine or thirty. The wallet held about six hundred dollars. I dropped it back in the bag.

I dressed, and looked out into the corridor. It was clear. I went back to my room, called down for orange juice and coffee and the *Miami Herald*, and had a quick shower and shave. It was nine twenty-five and I was just finishing the coffee when she called. She was going over to Miami, and would be back at noon. The message was as clipped and precise as an inter-office memo.

I killed a couple of hours swimming off the beach and had just come in and changed when the phone rang. This time her voice was a little friendlier, and there was a hint of suppressed excitement in it. 'I've got something to show you,' she said.

I knocked lightly on 316, and she opened almost immediately. Her hair was up in the chignon, of course, softly clubbed and worn low on the nape of the neck, and while the dress was just a summer cotton she looked as slender and smart as a fashion show. I kissed her. She submitted agreeably enough, but I could sense impatience. Pulling away from me, she nodded towards the dresser.

There were two things on it that hadn't been here this morning. One was a small tape recorder about the size of a portable typewriter, and the other an old briefcase plastered all over with labels. It had come air express, and I could see the return address on one of the labels. It was the same as that on her driver's licence.

'That's the mail you were waiting for?' I asked.

She nodded. 'It's just come. And the tape recorder is what I went to Miami for. Have you ever heard your voice on one?'

'I don't think so,' I said. 'Did you buy the recorder?'

'Yes,' she replied. 'Why?'

'I just wondered. I assume it has something to do with that proposition you mentioned, and it occurred to me I must represent a sizable investment by this time. Four or five hundred to have me investigated by those key-hole astronomers, and now another couple of hundred for the recorder. You must be very sure of yourself.'

'It's a calculated risk,' she said.

She unstrapped the briefcase. I could see excitement growing in her face as she opened it and began removing its contents. They appeared to me to be largely rubbish.

There were a dozen or more thin pamphlets I recognized as the annual statements of corporations, some old fire-insurance policies, and two or three stenographer's notebooks. She casually tossed all this into the wastepaper basket.

'I didn't want my housekeeper to know what I was really after,' she explained. 'So I told her to ship the briefcase and I'd look for the papers I needed. Oh——
'Here we are.'

There were two of them, flat cardboard boxes about seven inches square. They were packed with reels of tape. She selected one and put it on the machine, and stuck an empty reel on the other spindle. When the tape was connected, she ran several feet of it on to the empty reel with a control on the front panel, and pressed the 'Play' switch. A man's voice issued from the speaker. She adjusted the volume.

'——take a chance and hold the Lukens Steel for another five points. I think it'll go, but the minute it does, sell. It's too volatile for my blood pressure. How'd Gulf Oil close, Chris?'

'Let's see——' This was also a man's voice. *'Here we are. Gulf was up three-quarters. I'd say hang on to it.'*

'I intend to. And buy me another hundred shares in the morning.'

'Right. One hundred Gulf at the market. Anything else, Mr. Chapman?'

'Just one more thing. Will you ask the research department to send me everything they've got or can dig up on an outfit called Trinity Natural Gas? It's a pipeline company that was formed about two years ago. The stock sold over the counter until last month, but now it's listed on the American Exchange. Marian has a hunch about it. She went to college with the man who's head of it, and says he's a ball of fire.'

She stopped the machine and glanced at me. 'Do you know what it is?'

I lit a cigarette. 'Sounds like a man talking to his broker over the phone.' I couldn't see what the excitement was, or why she wanted me to listen to it.

'Right,' she said. She ran the tape back, watching the mechanical counter on the panel. 'Now listen closely. I'm going to play that last speech again, and I want you to repeat it.'

'Okay,' I said.

She pressed the 'Play' switch again. Chapman's voice began. '*Just one more thing. Will you ask the research department—*' I listened, noting at the same time that she was taking it down in shorthand. It was only five or six sentences.

She stopped the machine at the end of it, and rapidly transcribed her notes. She handed me the sheet of paper with the sentences written out in longhand.

'I don't need it,' I said. 'I've heard it twice.'

'Read it anyway,' she said. 'So you won't pause or stumble.' Plugging in the microphone, she handed it to me. 'Hold it about there. Don't jiggle it, or bump it. When I throw the machine on "Record" and the tape starts rolling, begin reading.'

'Don't you have to erase what's on there first?'

She shook her head. 'It erases and records at the same time. Ready? Here we go.'

She started it, and I read the speech into the microphone. She stopped the machine, and ran the tape back, still watching the counter. I could sense she was keyed-up. I knew what she was doing by now, of course, but it struck me as absurd. She put the machine on 'Play Back' and sat down near me on the end of the bed. I started to say something, but she cut me off with an imperious

gesture of her hand. She sat with her head lowered, listening intently.

She'd gone back pretty far this time, and it was the man called Chris who was speaking.

'—one hundred Gulf at the market. Anything else, Mr. Chapman?'

'Just one more thing. Will you ask the research—' Chapman's voice went on through the speech. At the end of it there was a little *whrrp* where she'd put it on 'Record' and I'd started speaking.

'Just one more thing. Will you ask the research department to send me everything they've got—'

I sat bolt upright. 'Hey——!' She clapped a hand over my mouth. We both sat perfectly still until it was finished.

She got up and turned the machine off. Then she turned to me with a faint smile. 'Now you know what I was listening to all the time.'

I stared at her. 'It's incredible. They're almost exactly the same.'

She nodded. 'That's the reason I wanted to do it this way, with the two voices end-to-end. As a comparison check, it's absolutely conclusive. You see, it's not only the timbre—plenty of male voices are down in *that* low end of the baritone range—but you both have the same quick, alert, self-assured way of speaking. Clipped, and rather aggressive. Either of you could do a perfect imitation of Ralph Bellamy playing one of those detective roles. In fact, Harris quite often does, at parties.'

'Harris?' I asked.

'Harris Chapman, the man you were just listening to.'

'Do we actually sound that much alike?' I asked. 'Or is it the recording?'

She shook a cigarette from a packet on the dresser, and leaned down. I held the lighter for her. She sat in the armchair, facing me with her knees crossed. 'I could tell you apart, in person,' she said thoughtfully. 'And on hi-fi equipment. I might even, in fact, on the telephone—because I'm aware there are two of you.'

'What do you mean by that?' I asked.

She inhaled smoke and regarded me coolly. 'It's obvious, isn't it? If you were speaking over the telephone to anybody who knew Harris Chapman but didn't know you, you'd be Chapman.'

'I'm not so sure—'

'Let me explain,' she interrupted. 'If you said you were Harris Chapman, why should he doubt it? Your voices are almost identical, and they're not there side-by-side for comparison. Add to that the way you both speak—which is almost exactly alike, and very much *unlike* Southern speech in general. He lives in Thomaston, Louisiana. You follow me, don't you?'

'Yes,' I said. 'In other words, he's unique—at least, in his manner of speech. They hear it—it's Chapman.'

'Exactly. You could fool anybody who knows him.'

'For just about five seconds,' I said.

She smiled. 'No. You're wrong.'

'If you're speaking of impersonation, it takes one other thing. Information.'

'I was coming to that,' she said. 'It happens that I know more about Harris Chapman than anybody else in the world.'

'What are you driving at?'

'This. In ten days of intensive study, you could *become* Harris Chapman—that is, to the extent that Harris Chapman as a personality or an individual is projected over a telephone circuit.'

I stood up and crushed out my cigarette. 'And why should I?'

'Would you consider seventy-five thousand dollars a good reason?'

I paused, still holding the mangled cigarette stub. 'You're joking.'

'Do I look as if I were?'

'Where would you get that much money?'

'From him, naturally.'

'You mean steal it?'

She nodded coolly. 'I suppose you would call it stealing. A rather unusual type of theft, and one that's absolutely fool-proof.'

'There is no such animal.'

'In this particular case, there is. It's unique. I suppose you've heard the expression "perfect crime". This is the perfect crime, the one that'll never be solved.'

I lit another cigarette, still looking at her. She had me badly confused by now. I sat down on the corner of the bed near her. 'I'll admit I don't know nearly as much about girls as I did when I was nineteen,' I said. 'But, even so, your picture and sound track just don't match. Perfect crime—— Offhand, I'd say the worst crime you've ever committed was taking advantage of a stuck parking meter.'

She gestured with a slim hand. 'I didn't say I'd ever stolen anything before.'

'But you're going to now. Why?'

'We can go into the reasons later. I want to know if you're interested.'

'I'm always interested in money.'

'Have you ever stolen anything?'

'No. But I doubt that's highly significant. Nobody's ever tried me with seventy-five thousand before.'

'Then you *could*?'

'Probably. But it couldn't be as fool-proof as you say.'

'It is,' she said definitely. 'As a matter of fact, nobody will ever know it was stolen.'

'Why? Money doesn't evaporate. And just where is it?'

She studied me thoughtfully. 'Your stepfather was a broker, I believe you said. So you know what a trading account is?'

'Sure.'

'All right. Harris Chapman has a trading account with a New Orleans brokerage firm. The man called Chris you just heard on the tape is the registered representative who handles it for him. And at the present moment the stocks and cash in the account add up to just a little over a hundred and eighty thousand dollars.'

I whistled. Then I glanced sharply at her. 'So?'

'Well, you know how a trading account like that is handled.'

'Sure. The stocks he buys are credited to his account, but they're kept there at the brokerage house in the vault, so he doesn't have to go through all the rigmarole of endorsing them and sending them back when he wants to sell. He buys and sells all the time, just by picking up the phone——' I got it then, and she was crazy.

'You see?' she said.

'I see nothing,' I replied. 'Money in a brokerage account is just as safe as money in a bank account. It takes a signature to get it; you ought to know that. Two signatures, as a matter of fact. You have to sign a receipt for the transaction, and then endorse the cheque to cash it.'

She interrupted. 'Will you listen just a minute? The idea is nothing like as simple as that. Of course it wouldn't work in any other set of circumstances, but as I told you

before, this is unique. All it'll require is the most elementary sort of forgery because nobody'll ever look at the signatures anyway.'

'Why?'

'Because there'll never be the slightest doubt but that Harris Chapman drew the money out himself. I'll take care of that——'

'You'd better fill me in a little,' I said. 'Just who is Chapman, and what's your connection with him?'

She leaned over to tap ash off her cigarette. 'He's a businessman, and for a small town a fairly wealthy one. He owns Chapman Enterprises, which consists of a newspaper, a radio station, cotton gin, and a warehouse, among other things——'

'And you worked for him?'

Her eyes met mine without any expression at all. 'I worked for him. I was his private secretary, mistress, executive officer, fiancée—you name it. I went to work for him eight years ago, and for the past six I've been a sort of combination of executive vice-president and full-time wife. Except that I wasn't married to him.'

'Why not?'

'For the tired old reason that he already had a wife.'

'You don't look like the type that'd dangle that bag.'

'Shall we drop that part of it for the moment?'

'Sorry,' I said. 'But I still don't see how you think you're going to get away with it. What's Chapman going to be doing all the time you're looting his trading account?'

'Nothing,' she said.

'Why?'

'He'll be dead.'

'How do you know?'

'Because I'm going to kill him.'

I caught a no-show out of the Miami airport at four-fifteen, and was at Idlewild a little after eight. I took the limousine over to town. It was one of those blustery November nights, not really wet but with scattered shot-charges of rain hurled on a cold north wind. I didn't have an overcoat. People looked at me as if I were crazy as I came out of the terminal and caught a cab. The small hotel on West 44th Street where I'd stayed once before was all right, but the room faced an airwell and was small and cheerless.

I sat down on the bed and counted my money. I had three hundred and sixty left. Three hundred, I thought, after I buy a coat. No, I had to have a hat, too. This was New York. I couldn't go job-hunting along Madison Avenue looking like a refugee from Muscle Beach. It was going to be tough enough as it was; the last reference I could give was two years old. I went up the street to a bar and had a drink, but it only made me feel worse. After a while I went back to the room and tried to read, but it was futile. I kept thinking about seventy-five thousand dollars and blue water and sunlight and a sleek dark head. I threw the magazine on to the floor and lay on the side of the bed staring down at it.

What did I care what happened to some man who was nothing to me but a name? If I were so concerned over his safety, why didn't I call him and tell him she was going to kill him? I knew she was, didn't I?

That was it. She still was; my walking out on her hadn't changed anything. The money he had in that account was only a collateral issue as far as she was concerned. I remembered the way she'd lain there in the darkness, rigid and wide-awake and staring, with her hands clenched, and wondered what he'd done to her.

Well, I'd never know; but the chances were very good he'd never do it to anybody else.

So what had I accomplished by running, apart from doing myself out of seventy-five thousand dollars? Well, hell, I'd kept myself from being implicated, hadn't I? I wasn't going to kill anybody, and wind up in the death-house.

But she hadn't asked me to, had she? All she'd wanted me to do was get that money for her—from a man who would already be dead. Still, I'd be an accessory.

What *had* she meant?

How would I know? I thought. I'd run off before she could tell me.

The next morning I bought an overcoat and hat and started out. I answered some ads first, without any luck, and then started hitting the agencies blind. My feet got tired. I filled in forms. I left my name and telephone number. The weather was still blustery and cold, with a lowering grey sky like dirty metal. If this were the movies I thought, I'd pass a travel-agency window and there'd be a big sun-drenched picture of a brunette in a bathing suit sitting on the beach in front of a white hotel with the caption: COME TO MIAMI. She was a blonde, as it turned out, and the invitation was: COME TO KINGSTON. A man was landing a marlin off the end of a pier. With a flyrod, as nearly as I could tell. You could see Jamaica was a fisherman's paradise. I came back to the bar across the street from the hotel around two and had a Scotch while I wondered what she was doing. And how a girl managed to look elegant in a bathing suit. Not lifted-pinkie elegant, but 18th-century elegant. I went up to my room and lay down on the bed. It was raining now; I could see it falling into the airwell. I picked up the phone and asked for Long Distance.

'Miami Beach,' I said. 'The Golden Horn Motel. Personal call to Mrs. Marian Forsyth.' At least I could talk to her.

'Hold the line, please.'

I waited. I could hear the operator.

'Golden Horn,' a girl's voice said. 'Who? Mrs. Forsyth? Just a moment, please . . . I'm sorry; she's left.'

I dropped the phone back on the cradle. Well, it wasn't everybody who was smart enough to turn down a seventy-five-thousand-dollar proposition before he'd even heard it. And I'd never see her again. I lit a cigarette and watched the rain, and thought of some of the places we could have gone together—Acapulco, and Bimini, and Nassau. . . .

Thirty minutes later the phone rang. It was Miami Beach. Her voice was exactly as cool, urbane, and pleasant as ever. 'I finally decided you were never going to call, so—'

I suppose I could ask, I thought. But why bother? There was something inevitable about her; if I'd been holed up in a Lamasery in Tibet it wouldn't have made the slightest difference.

'You win,' I said. 'I'll be there some time tonight.'

'That's wonderful, Jerry.'

'Where?' I asked.

'You're sweet. Then you did try to call me?'

'You know damn well I did. Where?'

'Two hundred and six Dover Way,' she replied. 'It's a wonderful place to work.'

I caught a flight out of Idlewild at five forty-five. The rain had stopped, but it was colder. As I was going up the loading ramp of the DC-7, a coloured boy from the catering department was coming down. I dropped the overcoat on his arm. 'Have a good Christmas,' I said.

When we were airborne and the NO SMOKING sign went off, I lit a cigarette. How she'd learned where I was in New York was routine, actually. She'd known all the time. All her detectives had to do was notify their New York office what flight I'd taken out of Miami, and have me picked up at Idlewild again and tailed to the hotel. The rest of it, however, was considerably more subtle—waiting me out till I called first and learned she'd left the hotel without a forwarding address. And then giving me a long half-hour to think about what I'd thrown away for ever, like an old man remembering some girl who'd done everything but draw him a diagram when he was fifteen. That was a nice touch.

We were down at Miami shortly after nine. I waited impatiently out front for my bag and took a cab. It seemed to take for ever, through the downtown traffic and across the MacArthur Causeway. Dover Way was on the Biscayne side, not far from the bay, a quiet side street only three or four blocks long. 206 was half of a side-by-side duplex set back off the street with a hedge in front and shadowy, bougainvillea-covered walls on both sides. I paid off the cab and went up the walk. Lights were on beside the door, but the adjoining apartment appeared to be dark. I pressed the button.

She was wearing a dark skirt and severe white blouse. I kicked the door shut, dropped the bag, and took her in my arms. She submitted to being kissed in that same cool way—quite gracious about it but not particularly eager that it become a trend. She smiled. 'How do you like our place?'

It was small, well-furnished, air-conditioned, and very quiet. The living room, which seemed to be more than half of it, was carpeted in grey, and the floor-length curtains at the window in front and the larger one on the

left were dark green. The sofa and three chairs were Danish modern, and there was a long coffee table that appeared to be teak and was protected with plate glass. There were three hassocks covered with corduroy in explosive colours. Straight opposite, an open doorway led into the bedroom. Just to the right of it another opened into a small dining area and kitchen. To the left of the bedroom doorway were some built-in bookshelves with sliding glass doors. A radio-phonograph console in limned oak stood in the corner.

The tape recorder she'd bought was set up on one end of the coffee table, plugged into an extension cord that ran across the carpet to a wall outlet. There were several boxes of tape beside it, and some stenographer's notebooks and pencils.

'I was working,' she explained. She sat down on one of the hassocks beside the coffee table and reached for a cigarette. I lit it for her, and one for myself, and sat cross-legged on the floor.

I looked round the apartment. 'You were pretty sure I'd come back, weren't you?'

'Why not?' she asked. 'I've been studying you for a week.'

'And seventy-five thousand would do it? All it took was a little time?'

She nodded. 'Actually, I don't think you care a great deal for money as such, but you have some very expensive tastes. And you're quite cynical.'

She was probably right, I thought. I looked at the classic line of the head and the brilliant colouring and the severe formality of the blouse that came up to end in a plain band collar round the softness of her throat and wondered if she'd considered the possibility I might have come back because of her. I asked her.

'No,' she said. 'Why should I?'

'Because maybe I did, in part.'

'That sounds rather unlikely. At any rate, I wouldn't have depended on it.'

'Why?' I asked.

'You're quite an attractive young man. I doubt you have any great problem with girls; and the country's full of them.'

'You're overdoing the modesty. And why did you call me a young man?'

Her eyebrows raised. 'Twenty-eight?'

'And what's thirty-four?'

'So you checked my driver's licence?'

'Of course. Not for your age, naturally, but to find out who you were. Incidentally, you don't look thirty.'

'You're quite flattering,' she said. 'And now if we're through assessing my drawing power, why don't we get down to business?'

This was beginning to bug me a little. No woman had any right to be as attractive as she was and at the same time as contemptuous of the fact and of its effect on somebody else. I took her hand and pulled her down on the floor beside me and held her in my arms and kissed her. Instead of objecting, however, she put her arms around my neck. In a moment her eyes opened, very large and dreamy, just under mine. I kissed her again, feeling a tremendous excitement in just touching her.

(After a while I picked her up and carried her into the bedroom and turned off the light and undressed her very slowly, and she was as beautifully adept and as pleasant and as far away and unreachable as ever. Clearly, the simplest way to rid the agenda of distracting minor issues like sex was to get them over with.

CHAPTER FOUR

SHE lay beside me in the darkness. I could see the glowing tip of her cigarette.

'All right,' I said. 'Now tell me the whole thing.'

'Suppose we begin right where we left off? I'm going to destroy him.'

'Why?'

'Because I hate him.'

'And why do you?'

I thought I heard her sigh. 'Why don't you try a wild guess as to why a woman might hate a man after she's wrecked her own marriage for him and thrown away her reputation and helped him make a fortune, and lived for him twenty-four hours a day for six of the last few years she'd ever have to give anybody——?'

'Take it easy,' I said. 'I'm just a bystander. So he left you?'

'Yes.' Then she laughed. It was like glass breaking. 'Of course; while I was running his business for him, I should have suggested we set up a pension plan for over-age employees. I'd have nothing to worry about. I could buy a little cottage, get a cat for companionship, and live the full, rich life every woman looks forward to——'

'Knock it off,' I protested. 'Who is she? And how do you know it's permanent?'

'Oh, she's quite pretty. Honey-coloured and virginal looking, with a wide-eyed and appealing sort of defencelessness about her. Like anthrax, or a striking cobra——'

'Come off it,' I said. 'How the hell could you lose out to a cornball routine like that? She'd never lay a glove on you.'

'It's a little trick you do with numbers. She's twenty-three.'

'Well, what of it?'

'Oh, you *are* a young man, aren't you? I'd forgotten, men do go through a phase between their first and second passes at the jail-bait when they're actually interested in women—— But never mind. They're going to be married in January.'

'You're getting ahead of me,' I said. 'He couldn't marry you because he already had a wife. What happened to her?'

'What happened to her, besides the fact they haven't lived together for the past eight years, is that she died about five months ago.'

'Well, look—I doubt very seriously anybody could hand you a line six years long, so if he was really serious why didn't he get a divorce?'

'He and his wife were both Catholics.'

'I see. And now that he *can* remarry——'

'Yes,' she said. 'You see.'

'And I see something more. You'll never get away with it.'

'Yes——'

'Look. He took everything you could give him for six years, and then when he finally could get married he jilted you for somebody else. If he's killed, it'll take the police about twenty minutes to figure it out.'

'You underestimate me,' she broke in. 'I'm going to take a hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars away from him, and kill him. And nobody will ever suspect I did it, for the simple reason they won't even know it was done at all. Does that satisfy you?'

'No,' I said. 'It can't be done.'

She sighed. 'You're forgetting something I told you.'

That I know more about Harris Chapman than anybody else on earth. I'm going to destroy him from the inside.'

'Hold it a minute,' I said. 'If you knew so much about him, why didn't you see this fluff-ball moving in on you?'

'See it? Don't be ridiculous. I saw every stage of it before it even happened, but what do you suggest I should have done about it? Compete with a twenty-three-year-old professional virgin, after he was already tired of me? I saw it, all right; I had a front-row seat. He hired her as a stenographer, and I had the honour and privilege of training her. Sometimes I wake up at night——'

'If it's that kind of thing,' I said, 'why the money angle?'

'Money is important to me. I like success. I poured everything I had into making him one, thinking I was doing it for both of us. Do you think I'm going to move aside now and give it up? Let him hand it all to some simpering and feather-brained little bitch who can't even balance a cheque book?'

'Tell me the rest of it,' I said.

'All right. First, about the apartment. We had to have a quiet place where we could work without being disturbed and with no chance of being overheard. The motel simply wouldn't do. I was registered there under my right name, of course, and it's imperative that no one ever finds out that I even know you——'

I interrupted her. 'What about those detectives you've had following me around?'

'That's a good point. I used another name, and paid them in cash. The fact they know your name is of no significance at all unless you can be traced to me in some way. I'm the one who knows Harris Chapman.'

'Okay,' I said.

'I rented the apartment on a six months' lease, under

your name. I'm Mrs. J. L. Forbes, and there's nothing to connect me with the Mrs. Forsyth who stayed briefly at the Golden Horn. There's no reason for you not to use your right name; you have nothing to hide, and you can go right on living here afterwards if you like. No one will notice if you're gone from time to time, as you will be. It's handled by a rental agency. The people who have the other apartment won't be here until some time in December, so we have it all to ourselves and don't have to worry about being heard through the walls.

'We don't have much time. Today is the fifth, and he'll be here the night of the thirteenth. In addition, I have to go to Nassau and New York——'

'Why?'

'Simply to prove I've been there. When I resigned and left on this trip, Miami Beach, Nassau, and New York were the three places I was going. If I changed my plans and spent all my time here it might look suspicious afterwards, especially since this is the place Harris Chapman is going to disappear. So I'll go to both places long enough to send the usual asinine postcards and bring back some souvenir gifts. That means I'll be gone from here about four days of the eight we have in which to coach you. However, we'll use the tape recorder and you'll have the tapes to study while I'm gone.'

'You're sure he's coming here?'

'Yes. I made all the reservations for him. He goes on one big-game fishing trip every year, for his vacation. For the past two years he's gone to Acapulco, but this time he's coming to Florida again.'

'And somewhere along the line I'm going to take his place?'

'Yes.'

'For how long?'

'Just under two weeks. I think it can be done in twelve days.'

'Describe him,' I said.

'Apart from the fact you're both about six feet, you don't resemble each other at all, if that's what you mean.'

'What else would I mean? You don't think he's going to be invisible for those twelve days, do you? He may be a voice on the telephone to the people at home, but down here—— But never mind. Go ahead and describe him.'

'He's thirty-nine. Six feet. A hundred and ninety-five pounds. Grey eyes. Somewhat fair complexion, always with a tan. Brown hair, beginning to grey at the temples except that he touches it up.'

'That'll do,' I said. 'I'm twenty-eight. The height is the same within probably an inch, but I'm fifteen pounds lighter. Blue eyes. Darker complexion. And hair that's just a shade from being black. Q.E.D.'

'It's nowhere near that simple,' she cut in impatiently. 'In the first place, any police officer could write a book on the general unreliability of descriptions. And secondly, if you've had acting experience, you should know what I'm driving at. You're not merely trying to *look like* Harris Chapman—you're assuming the whole character of Harris Chapman. And further, this same character projected quite logically into a strange and finally shattering experience—which is going to be what the witnesses will remember, and not the colour of his hair. Incidentally, he wears a hat anyway. You're simply going to make them remember the wrong things.'

'Such as?'

'Let me give you a brief sketch for a start. He's quite vain about his appearance, uses a sun lamp in winter to keep his tan intact, and wears a thin, pencil-line moustache because he thinks his upper lip is too long. He has a

tendency toward hypochondria and carries round a miniature drugstore with him, and worries constantly and probably needlessly about two things—cancer and mental illness, the latter because he has an older brother who cracked up in his late teens. When that smoking and lung cancer thing first started several years ago, he not only switched over to filter cigarettes, but smoked them in a filter holder.

~ 'He wears glasses—horn rims—and is somewhat hard of hearing in his left ear, the result of a diving accident when he was sixteen, though he refuses to admit it and claims his hearing is perfect in both ears. I'm perhaps making him sound doddering and fatuous, which he isn't at all; he's a hellishly attractive man with a lot of drive, but I'm stressing these quirks and idiosyncracies for a reason—'

'Sure,' I said impatiently. 'They're character tags, and props. But, look—so I do wear horn-rimmed glasses, grow a moustache, use a long cigarette holder, and go round tossing pills into my face, what does it buy? I still won't look like him, and I wouldn't fool anybody who's seen him since he was fifteen.'

'You won't have to, obviously. None of the people you'll be in contact will ever have seen him at all. And they never will.'

'But you're forgetting something. As soon as he disappears, they're sure as hell going to see photographs of him.'

'No,' she said. 'That'll be taken care of.'

'How?' I asked.

'To be of any value in tracing him they'd have to be good likenesses and taken within the past ten years. There aren't too many. I have most of them, and I know where the others are. He had one made for that saccharine little bitch about two months ago, but we can forget it.'

It's one of those gooey and dramatic things with a ton of glamour and no resemblance.'

'All right,' I said. 'Tell me the rest of it.'

She told me. She talked for twenty minutes, and when she was through I was glad she didn't hate me. Chapman didn't have a chance. It was brilliant, and it was deadly, and I couldn't see a flaw in it anywhere.

I awoke early the next morning, before seven o'clock, but she was already up. She stood in the doorway in blue lounging pyjamas, sipping a glass of orange juice.

'The coffee will be ready in about five minutes,' she said.

I lit a cigarette and propped myself on an elbow to look at her. 'If I were a sculptor, I'd capture that head or go crazy and kill myself.'

She glanced coolly at her watch. 'Never mind capturing my head; you're supposed to assimilate what's in it, and we start in ten minutes. When you shave, don't forget the moustache.'

She sounded crisp and efficient, and I found out before the day was over I didn't know the half of it. She had a genius for organizing material, and she was a slave-driver. By the time I'd showered and put on light slacks and a T-shirt, she had my coffee and orange juice ready on the coffee table in the living room and was seated with hers on one of the hassocks at the other end of it. Between us was the tape recorder. The microphone was mounted on a little stand, facing her, and beside it were some boxes of tape and two stenographer's notebooks.

'I'll be working from shorthand notes,' she said, 'so there'll be no lost motion, and when we come to a stop we'll stop the tape. But before we start, we'd better break the job down and analyse it.'

'Right,' I said. 'How many people do I have to talk to, and how often?'

'Two,' she said. 'Chris Lundgren at the broker's office in New Orleans, nearly every day. And to her, every day. Her name, incidentally, is Coral Blaine.'

I drank some of the coffee, and thought about it. 'It's rough. Look at it—I've got to know everything about Chapman that these people know, and everything about these people that Chapman knows, plus a thousand business details and dozens of other people. It's damn near impossible.'

She interrupted. 'Of course it's impossible; no mind could absorb all that in eight days. But you don't have to.'

'No?'

'Of course not.' She waved a slim hand. 'You don't have to pass an examination in all this stuff; all you have to do is carry on two or three short telephone conversations each day without making a really dangerous mistake. Analyse it; what does it take, actually? A quick mind—which you have—some ability in bluffing and improvising, a grasp of most of the salient and obvious facts and a few of the ones that *only Harris Chapman could possibly know*, and there you are—the illusion is complete. And don't forget, you're always in control of the conversation; you're the boss. When you see you're about to get in over your head, change the subject. And in the end, there's nothing connecting you but a piece of wire. Break it. And call back later with the right information. You'll have a prompter.'

'You mean the tapes?'

She nodded. 'They'll be numbered, and you'll know what's covered in each one.'

'Good,' I said.

She smiled. 'And don't forget, it's only the first week you have to be careful. After that, it doesn't matter.'

I looked at her. I'd forgotten that, and it was one of the really brilliant angles of the whole thing. This girl was clever. And all she wanted out of life was to kill a man. It seemed a senseless waste. The thought startled me, and I shrugged it off. It was her life, wasn't it?

'All right,' I said. 'Roll One.'

'Harris Chapman was born in Thomaston April fourteen, nineteen-eighteen. Father's name: John W. Chapman. Owned the Ford agency, and was one of the largest stockholders in the Thomaston State Bank. His mother's maiden name was Mary Burke, and she was the only child of a Thomaston attorney. John W. sold out and retired in nineteen-forty, and moved to California. Both still living, in La Jolla.

'Only two children. Keith is two years older than Harris. The summer he was nineteen, after his freshman year at Tulane, he hit a twelve-year-old girl with his car. She wasn't seriously injured, but shortly afterwards he began to go to pieces. He quit sleeping, or if he did sleep nobody could figure out when, and lost weight and became withdrawn. It was the onset of schizophrenia, of course, and probably the accident had little or nothing to do with it. At any rate, his condition became hopeless, and he's spent more than half the past twenty-two years in one mental institution or another.

'Harris has always been haunted by this, as I told you, particularly because there had been a prior case of mental illness in the family, a great uncle or something. Fear of an hereditary taint, you see. Foolish, of course, but I told you he has a tendency toward hypochondria.

'He finished high school in nineteen-thirty-six. His

mother wanted him to go to a Catholic school, so he went to Notre Dame. He graduated in nineteen-forty-one, and Pearl Harbour caught him in his first year at Tulane Law School.'

She stopped the tape, and reached for a cigarette. I lit it for her. 'Any questions?' she asked.

'One,' I said. 'Bring me up to date on the brother. Where is he now?'

'La Jolla, with his parents.' She pressed the 'Record' switch and the tape began to roll again. 'Harris finished out the term at Tulane and went in the Navy, and was commissioned an ensign that summer. He just barely got past the physical, with that bad ear.'

He'd had a tour of sea duty on an aircraft carrier. She went on talking. She'd pushed the hassock aside now and was sitting cross-legged on the rug with the stenographic notebook between her knees. I leaned back against a chair and watched her, studying the proud and slender face that could have been downright arrogant except for the saving loveliness of the eyes. It occurred to me she was the most striking-looking, and most fascinating, woman I'd ever seen.

She reached over and stopped the tape. 'Are you listening?' she asked crisply.

'Sure,' I said, and repeated the last thing she'd said. Chapman had been transferred to shore duty in Seattle.

'Oh,' she said. 'The way you were looking at me—'

'Simply because I think you're beautiful.'

She sighed. Going into the bedroom, she returned with a pillow. She dropped it beside the coffee table. 'Lie down, facing the other way, and close your eyes. Concentrate.'

I lay down. She went on, pausing now and then to arrange her notes so there wouldn't be any blank areas on the tape. Chapman was a full lieutenant at the end of

the war. He went back to Tulane Law School at the beginning of the spring term in 1946, and before the end of it he was married to a New Orleans girl he met at a Mardi Gras ball. Her name was Grace Trahan. She was a slight, dark girl with a delicate constitution, very pretty in an ethereal sort of way, and apparently frigid to the point of phobia.

'He never said much about it,' she went on, 'but I gather it was pretty horrible on their wedding night, and never did get any better. Psychic trauma of some kind, I suppose; probably something that happened in her childhood.'

They tried to make a go of it, but there were other factors besides her aversion to the bed. She thought they should have more financial help from his parents instead of struggling along on the GI Bill. And she didn't want to leave New Orleans. Less than a year after he'd finished law school and moved back to Thomaston to open his office, they separated. She went home to mother. Her health was growing worse. She was anaemic, among other things.

Marian stopped the tape again. I looked at my watch and saw with surprise it was after ten. 'How are you getting it?' she asked.

'Fine,' I said. I sat up and lit cigarettes, and leaned back against the chair. 'But when do you actually appear on the scene?'

'Very shortly,' she replied. 'But I want to finish out this roll exclusively with Harris. It'll be easier to refer to later.'

She made some more notes, started the tape, and went on, describing the town, the small country club, and some of his friends. We began to near the end of the roll.

'He has a fast, aggressive way of walking. He won't

admit it, but he can't carry liquor very well. Becomes argumentative if he has too much, which is usually anything beyond the third Martini. Music means nothing to him, and he's a poor dancer. For the past two years on these annual fishing trips he's picked up girls, probably very young ones. He doesn't know that I'm aware of this, but I doubt he'd have bothered to lie about it. After all, we weren't married.

“Maybe it's because of the legal training and courtroom experience, but he's totally unafraid of scenes and will argue with anybody, anywhere. Waiters impress him not at all, and I've been through some bad moments when he's sent the same dish back three times, or refused to tip a waiter who gave poor service. I don't mean he's loud-mouthed or uncouth, but he is demanding and perhaps rather insensitive. He always adds up a bill before he pays it. He buys a new Cadillac every year. He's a very poor driver, and drives far too fast. He's very self-assured with women, the same as you are. You'll have no trouble playing him. When they describe you afterwards, if you learn all this, they're going to be describing Harris Chapman to the last gesture.

She stopped the machine, and stood up. ‘All right. Re-roll that tape and start playing it back. I'll run out and get us some sandwiches.’

‘Incidentally, what about the housekeeping arrangements? Do we go out for dinner?’

‘Yes,’ she replied. ‘It'll be all right if we go round to different places so we won't be remembered. We can fix our own coffee and orange juice for breakfast, and have sandwiches for lunch.’

‘You turned the car back?’

‘Yes. After all, I'm supposed to be in Nassau. You'll hire one, of course, before he gets here, but in the mean-

time we can use cabs. All right, Jerry; re-roll that tape and get busy.'

She went into the bedroom. I started the tape, turned up the volume, and walked up and down as I listened to it. The bedroom door was open. I stepped inside. (The blue pyjamas were tossed casually on the bed and she was beyond it with her back turned, wearing only bra and pants as she stood before the clothes closet. I looked at the long and exquisitely slender legs, ever so faintly tanned below the line of her swim suit and pure ivory above as they flowed into the triangular wisp of undergarment about her hips.

She turned then. I must have taken a step towards her, for she said crisply, 'No, you don't! Outside!' She meant it. She took a slip from a drawer, and slid it over her head.

'I'm sorry, Teacher. But you're a very exciting girl.'

'Yes, yes, I know.' She tugged the slip down. 'I'm irresistible to twenty-eight-year-old wolves. I'm female, breathing, and within reach.'

'Thanks a million,' I said. 'From both of us.'

'You're welcome. Now get out there and get busy. And ~~put~~ the tape over; you've missed part of it.'

~~So~~ you will give yourself that much?' ~~She~~

waved a slender hand. 'Out, Cyrano.'

CHAPTER FIVE

I SHRUGGED, and went back to my study of Harris Chapman. She came out after a while and left to get the sandwiches. I looked after her. She could disturb a room by walking through it, and leave it empty by walking out of it. I forced my attention back to the tape. What was the matter with me, anyway?

When she returned, we didn't even stop while we ate. She asked questions about the things we'd covered so far, and tried to catch me in errors. 'Who is Robert Wingard?'

'Robin Wingard,' I said. 'He's manager of the radio station.'

'Good. And Bill McEwen? What does he do?'

'Bill McEwen is a girl.'

She shot me an approving glance. 'Very good.'

'Her real name is Billy Jean, she's twenty-seven years old, unmarried, and she's half the editorial staff of the paper, and sells advertising.'

'Correct,' she said. 'But don't get too cocky. We've only begun to scratch the surface.' She finished half her sandwich, threw the rest of it in the kitchen garbage can, and started a fresh roll of tape on the recorder.

'I was born in Cleveland,' she began. 'And went to school at Stanford. My mother died when I was in my early teens, and my father never remarried. He was a physician. A gynæcologist, and a good one. In about thirty-five years of practice he must have made considerably over a million dollars, and when he died a few years ago he left an estate of less than twenty thousand. Bad investments. Some day, maybe, somebody will write a book about the investment habits of doctors— But

never mind. It was his money. The point I'm trying to make is that it was probably his horrible example that first interested me in business and investment.'

When we entered the war she enrolled in a business college for a quick course in shorthand and typing, and went to work in a defence plant. And she liked it, from the first. She was alert, interested, and highly competitive, and in less than a year she was the private secretary to one of the top brass of the firm. In the spring of 1944 she met and married Kenneth Forsyth. He was a flier sent home for reassignment as an instructor at an air base near San Antonio, Texas.

They were happy enough, but she couldn't stand the boredom of having nothing to do but police a one-room apartment, so she went back to work, this time for the local office of one of the big nationwide brokerage outfits. She immediately fell in love with the stock market as if she'd invented it. Here was something you could get your teeth into; this was the whole world of business and industry, distilled. She studied it with the passionate intensity of another Baruch, trying to learn everything there was to learn about it. Forsyth remained in the service after the end of the war, but was transferred to another field near Dallas. Keeping house still bored her, so she went to work for the Dallas office of the same brokerage house.

Then in 1949 Forsyth was transferred to the air field at Thomaston, Louisiana, and she was out of a job. She found it unbearably dull. She didn't like small towns and their clique-ridden social life, and for a woman with ambition and a restless mind it was stifling. Then she met Chapman. That changed everything.

He'd just opened his law office, and while he wasn't very busy he did need somebody once in a while to type

briefs and answer the phone. She offered to do it, partly out of boredom and partly because he interested her. And before long he interested her even more. Here was a man with drive, business ability, and daring, and he was wasting himself on a piddling law practice. They were attracted to each other from the beginning.

His first venture, in the process of becoming a millionaire in eight years, was a laundromat, and it was she who prodded him into it.

'He defended the owner of the laundromat in a minor damage suit,' she went on. 'And got him off with a minimum judgment, but the man was in financial trouble and couldn't even pay the legal fee in full. I had an idea and went out and surveyed his place. His trouble was location; he was in the wrong end of town, where most of the families had washing machines of their own, and he had a bad parking problem. To the south of town there was a large coloured section swarming with children. I located a building that could be leased, and told Harris about it. Because of his father's connection with the bank, he had no trouble borrowing the money. He bought the man's machines at a terrific bargain, and moved them. We got a deacon of one of the coloured churches to run it, and I kept the books. Eight months later he sold it for a net profit of six thousand dollars.'

They were on their way. Next came a couple of real-estate speculations that paid off to the tune of better than fourteen thousand. By late 1950 she was working for him full time, and the law practice was only a small part of his operations. He was far over-extended and in debt to his ears, but he was growing, right along with the big business boom of the early 1950's. Chapman's wife had left him now, and Marian Forsyth and her husband had had several painful and increasingly bitter arguments

about her working for him. People were beginning to talk. She refused to quit. The showdown came in less than six months. Forsyth was transferred again.

The choice was hers, and she made it. She told Forsyth she wanted a divorce, and stayed in Thomaston. She was in love with Chapman.

She had no illusions as to what she was letting herself in for. He couldn't marry her, as long as his wife was alive, and in a small town no matter how discreet they were with the affair everybody was going to know. I thought of the snubs, and frozen stares. They probably didn't bother her a great deal, I thought—not during the six busy years while she had Chapman and the fascination of the job. But when he jilted her and left her standing alone and naked in the middle of town—— That must have been a long, long mile to the city limits.

'Wait a minute,' I said. 'A point's just occurred to me. You've got to have a legitimate excuse for going back, or it won't look right.'

She stopped the tape. 'Of course. But I still own my house there. It will take two weeks at least to sell it and put my furnishings in storage in New Orleans. And don't forget, I won't arrive there until he's left for his vacation, which will give it exactly the right touch.'

She was right, of course. It all fitted perfectly, like the stones in an Inca wall. If sheer deadliness could be beautiful, this operation of hers was a masterpiece.

We went on. We finished that roll of tape with a detailed account of how Chapman acquired the rest of his holdings in the next five years and how she'd led him a little at a time into growth stocks in the big bull market from 1950 to 1955, into IBM and Dow Chemical, and Phillips Petroleum, and United Aircraft, and Du Pont.

'Always for capital gains,' she went on. 'Income wasn't any good to him any more, not in the tax bracket he was in, or approaching. All those years I'd been studying stocks and the stock market paid off for him. He rode it up all the way. And last summer, when the market showed signs of running out of steam, we began switching to defence holdings—utilities, high-grade preferreds, and bonds. And cash. It's safe—except from me.'

It was three-thirty when we came to the end of the roll. 'Play it back,' she said, already making notes for the next session. I ran it. She fired questions at me until I was dizzy. She put on one of the rolls of recorded conversation between him and Chris Lundgren, and played it through. I listened, studying his speech, while she went out in the kitchen and mixed us two Martinis.

She lit a cigarette, took a sip of her drink, and stopped the machine. 'Tell me what you heard.'

'He's abrupt on the phone,' I said, 'at least in business matters. No asking how the other party is, or about families. He says *G'bye* just once and hangs up. Your name comes out almost *Mer'n*. He hits the first syllable of Du Pont, and the u is *iu*. *Dew-Pont*. He slurs hundred a little more than most people. *Hunrd*. He still uses *Roger* once in a while, left over from his service days.'

She nodded approvingly. 'Good ear. Keep it up.'

We knocked off at seven, changed, and took a cab over to Miami to have dinner at the Top O' the Columbus. She was a knockout in a dark dress, so very tall and beautifully groomed and poised. It made me feel good to see men—and women—turn to look at her. We sat by one of the big windows looking out over Biscayne Bay and its perimeter of blazing lights.

'You make all these other women look like peasants,' I said.

She smiled. 'Honing the old technique, Jerry? Why waste it on me?'

'No. I mean it.'

'Of course, dear. Conditioned reflexes are like that.' Then she went on. 'Now here's a point we have to consider. Lundgren's voice, of course, you'll recognize, but you've never heard hers.'

I sighed. 'That's easy. Until she identifies herself and I'm sure, I can say we have a bad connection and I can't hear very well.'

On the way back we ran a test. I got out of the cab at a drugstore not too far away, gave her time to reach the apartment, and called her from the phone booth. She read Lundgren.

'Chris? Chapman,' I said. I asked how the market had closed, discussed some stock or another, and gave an order or two, and then stepped out of character to ask, 'What do you think?'

'Good,' she said. 'Very good.'

I walked back to the apartment in the warm and ocean-scented darkness, thinking of seventy-five thousand dollars. When I let myself in she was just coming out of the bedroom. She'd taken off the dress and slip and was pulling the blue robe about herself.

She pursed her lips thoughtfully. 'Maybe just a *shade* less abrupt. But it's a fine point—'

'Stop worrying,' I said. 'I can do it.' I took hold of her arms. Then I was holding her tightly in mine and kissing her as if women were going to be transferred to some other planet in the morning.

When she could get her mouth free at last, she murmured, 'But I thought we'd work for another hour or two.' Then she relented. 'All right, Jerry—'

Enlightened management, I thought, never forgets the

importance of employee recreation. If the seal balks, toss him another herring. I started to say something angry and sarcastic, but choked it off. I wanted her so badly I'd take her on any terms at all.

Afterwards, of course, we did go back to work.

The next day was a repetition of the first. She was relentless. Chapman and Chapman Enterprises and Thomaston ran into my brain until they overflowed. We filled two tapes. I played them back. She questioned me. I played them again. And all the while I was conscious that she herself was taking more and more of my attention. I was thinking about her when I should have been concentrating. I didn't like it, but there it was.

We went out again for dinner, and came back and worked until eleven. I made love to her. She was as gracious about it, and as accomplished, and as completely unreachable as ever. I lay in the darkness thinking about her. It wasn't that she was cold, or that she merely endured it. It was worse. It was so unimportant she had trouble even noticing it.

Chapman, I thought, might not be the dirtiest bastard who ever lived, but he was the stupidest. I tried to imagine what she was like before she became numb to everything except remembered humiliation and hatred. The next morning, just at dawn, I awoke to find her struggling in my arms, trying to break free.

'Jerry,' she snapped, 'for heaven's sake, what are you trying to do? Break me in two?'

'Oh,' I said stupidly, looking round the room. 'I must have been having a bad dream.'

It started to come back to me then. I could see it all with a horrible clarity. I'd been running after her across the

Golden Gate bridge, and I'd caught her just before she could leap. I was trying to hold her back.

That day we filled the last roll of tape. She told me everything she knew about Coral Blaine, and she knew a lot—including the fact her name wasn't Coral at all, but Edna Mae. Apparently she was a believer in the old maxim of military science that you never stop studying the enemy. She described her, psycho-analysed her, and gave me a complete rundown on the affair from the time Chapman first gave her a job until the engagement was announced.

'I was scared the first time I saw her,' she said. 'For years I'd done all the hiring and firing of office personnel. He never interfered, hired anybody himself, or cared. I'll admit to being quite unfair a couple of times when I fired girls for no other reason than that they had their eyes on him—— But never mind. At any rate, when I saw this Blaine number, I had a premonition. Flawless natural blonde, about five-foot-three, and of course only twenty-three years old, but it was that dewy and virginal look that frightened me. He's forty—or will be next month.

'He saw the dew, all right; and I could see the cutlass between her teeth as she came over the rail. She was the daughter of an old friend of his, he said; she'd just graduated from some co-educational football factory in Texas and he'd promised her a job. I felt my way very slowly, and I hit resistance right away. I wasn't going to be able to fire this one. Nothing overt on either side, of course, but the resistance was there, and it was firm. So I moved her up to a better job I knew she couldn't handle. And all I accomplished was that I had to do her work myself. She came to work, incidentally, about three weeks after Mrs. Chapman died.'

It must have been bloody, I thought. And lonely as hell.

A wife in the same position had status and the solid weight of community opinion going for her, but she had nothing. She knew she'd lost, of course, long before the blow actually fell, and in the end Chapman didn't even have the decency to tell her himself. I gathered it wasn't that he was ashamed to, or reluctant to face her; he just didn't bother. Some business came up that was more important.

“You're not colouring this a little?” I asked.

She sighed. “I assure you I couldn't be that stupid. I'm telling you exactly what happened, because I have to. God knows I don't enjoy it; I'm no masochist. But obviously you have to know the truth, and not some dramatized version. I was informed of the engagement by Coral Blaine herself, in the office, on Monday morning, and if you have any doubts she knew exactly how to do it for the most exquisite effect, forget them. That was quite a day.”

Seven thousand years, I thought, from nine to five. With all those eyes watching, and nothing to crawl under and hide. An outstanding day, any way you looked at it. Then a sudden thought occurred to me, something I'd missed completely until now. It was what she had in mind for Coral Blaine.

“Do you think she'll know?” I asked.

She nodded coolly. “Yes. I should think she'd be pretty sure I did it—somehow.”

As a study in the subtler forms of revenge, I thought, that would be hard to match. Coral Blaine was having a husband and a million dollars snatched out of her reachy little hands, and she was going to know it was Marian who'd done it to her. And that she not only would never be able to prove it, but that she'd actually helped prove it *couldn't* have been Marian.

'If she's only twenty-three,' I said, 'she has a long and interesting life ahead of her, trying to figure that one out.'

'Yes, doesn't she?'

We went back to work. While she was gone to get the sandwiches at noon I suddenly remembered what day it was. This was the eighth. I looked up florists in the phone book, called one, and ordered two dozen roses. It was around four o'clock and we were still busy with Coral Blaine when the doorbell rang. I beat her to it, paid the delivery boy, and brought them in.

She glanced up as I put the long carton on the coffee table before her. 'Flowers? Why?'

'Happy birthday,' I said.

She shook her head chidingly. 'Oh, for heaven's sake.' Then she opened the box, and exclaimed, 'They're beautiful, Jerry. But how did you know it was my birthday?'

'Your driver's licence,' I replied.

'Snoopy.' She filled a vase with water and put them on the phonograph console at the other end of the room. She admired them for a moment, and then came over and put her arms about my neck.

She smiled. 'Dear Jerry, the indefatigable chaser of old streetcars he's already caught.'

It was no use, I thought. She was impervious; nothing could get through to her, no gesture of any kind. She'd had it. Then I wondered if I even knew myself what I was trying to tell her. It seemed to be all mixed up.

We went back to work.

CHAPTER SIX

SHE did some shopping the next morning, and left for Nassau around eleven. The minute she closed the door behind her, the apartment became almost achingly empty.

I assembled everything on the coffee table, and looked at it. Except for his identification, his clothes, and his car, here was Harris Chapman—seven rolls of tape, boxed, numbered, and indexed; horn-rim glasses; cigarette holder; the insipid filter cigarettes he smoked; the map of Thomaston she'd drawn with street names, locations of his businesses and his office, and an appended list of some twenty telephone numbers; three documents containing specimens of his signature, which had come from the old briefcase; and the bottle of gunk for lightening the dark shade of my hair and the sprouting moustache.

This latter wasn't really dye, she said, and if I didn't use too much of it there wouldn't be any noticeable artificial effect, but rather like that of brown hair bleached down a few shades by the sun. I went into the bathroom, combed in a light application of it, and started practising the signature. When my wrist was tired, I loaded the recorder with the first roll of tape, and turned it on. Her voice issued from the loudspeaker, and when I closed my eyes she seemed to be there in the room. I forced myself to concentrate.

When my brain was numb from memorizing, I went back to the signature again. I found I didn't have as much talent for forgery as I did for mimicry, but after several hundred attempts I could see definite improvement. I kept at it. After a while I tried breaking it down into

individual letters and writing each one hundreds of times to correct my errors. Around seven I walked over three or four blocks to a restaurant for dinner, and came back and worked until midnight. When I turned out the light, she was all around me in the darkness.

The next day was Sunday. I worked from seven a.m. till midnight with only brief periods out for food, attacking the job with intense concentration to keep her out of my mind. I was closing in on him. Whole sections of those five hours of recorded data were stamped into my mind intact. I could see him now, and feel him, and there was no longer even any need to practise his speech. The signature was improving. I went on writing it, hour after hour, and listening to the tapes. It was harder than I had ever worked at anything in my life. When I went to bed I was dizzy with fatigue.

She had left me five hundred dollars in cash. On Monday morning I went over to Miami and picked up a hired car, one with a trailer hitch. I drove out US 1 to a sporting goods place that hired boats and motors. Using my right name and my California driver's licence, plus the local address on Dover Way, I hired a complete outfit—sixteen-foot fibreglass boat, twenty-five-horse Johnson outboard, and a trailer with a winch. I put up a deposit against the week's rental, bought a spinning rod and some lures, asked the man about bonefishing flats in the Keys, and headed south on the highway.

In a little over an hour I was on Key Largo. I checked my highway map, noted the speedometer reading, and turned off US 1 into the dead-end road going towards the upper end of the Key, watching for launching sites. I found one, made a notation of the mileage, and went on. In a little over a mile there was another, and I noted the speedometer reading at this one also. I needed at least two

I could find fast and in the dark, so I'd have an alternate in case the first one was being used or someone was camped near it. There was nobody in sight at either of them now. I practised manoeuvring the car with the trailer behind it. It was awkward at first, but after about fifteen minutes I became fairly adept.

I backed down to the water once more, put on the fishing clothes I'd brought, and launched the boat. There was a moderate south-east breeze, but the water over the flats inside the line of the reefs was smooth. It took about fifteen minutes to run out over the reefs to the edge of the Stream. The boat handled nicely in the moderate sea and ground-swell off-shore, and would do all right provided the weather was no worse than it was now. I ran back, winched the boat on to the trailer, and drove back to Miami Beach.

There was a driveway along the side of the apartment and a garage in the rear. I backed into it, uncoupled the trailer and locked it in the garage, and left the car in the drive. When I let myself in the front of the apartment, there was a card from her in the letter-box.

It had been mailed Sunday afternoon in Nassau, and said she was flying to New York Monday night. It was printed in block letters, and was unsigned. 'I miss you,' she said. I wondered if she did. For a moment she was all around me in the apartment, the remembered gesture of a hand, the swing of a silken ankle, and the smooth dark head it was a joy for ever to watch.

I showered, and shaved, using a safety razor to get around the moustache. The latter was beginning to show, and surprisingly it made me look a little older, which was fine. I went to work, practising the signature. I could forge it well enough now to fool myself at times, but I had to learn to do it faster and more naturally. The next

morning I drove over to Miami to a salvage store and bought a second-hand tarpaulin, about eight by eight. On the way back I stopped at a building supply place and bought four concrete blocks, saying I wanted them to patch a wall. At a dime store I picked up a roll of wire and a cheap pair of pliers. I put everything in the boot, and locked it. I went back to the apartment and worked with furious concentration until midnight.

When I awoke in the morning and realized what day it was, there was a fluttery, sick feeling in my stomach. This was the thirteenth. He was supposed to be here tonight. I was scared. It was easy to say something was fool-proof—but was it, ever? A million things could go wrong. I tried to work some more, but had trouble concentrating. I didn't need any more preparation, anyway; I either had it pat now, or I never would. The only thing it took from here on was nerve. I wasn't at all sure I had that.

The morning passed with no word from her. Maybe he wasn't coming. I began to hope something had happened so he couldn't get away. Then at five-thirty in the afternoon the phone rang. It was a call from Mrs. Forbes, in New York, the operator said. Would I accept the charge? I said yes. She came on the line.

'Jerry? Listen, dear, I'm calling from a phone-box because I didn't want this call on my hotel bill. He's on his way.'

'Are you sure?' I asked.

'Yes. I just talked to a friend at home. He left late yesterday afternoon, intending to stay in Mobile last night. He should be there between midnight and two a.m. I'm leaving right away, and I'll be in Miami shortly before nine. Don't come to the airport.'

'Right,' I said.

'Is everything all right there?'

'Yes. Except that I wish you were here.'

'I will be, very shortly. Good-bye, dear.'

The afternoon was interminable; I paced the living room, chain-smoking cigarettes while I thought of a Cadillac and a DC-7 converging on Miami in a sort of cataclysmic and irrevocable vector. I wanted her here worse than I'd ever wanted anything, and I hoped he'd never arrive. He was a fast and reckless driver; maybe he'd have a wreck and kill himself. I went out and tried to eat dinner, and didn't know afterwards whether I had or not.

It was nine-thirty when I heard a car pull into the driveway. I opened the front door. She was coming up the walk with the cab driver behind her carrying the small overnight case. The rest of her luggage would still be in New York, in her hotel room. A very smart-looking hat was slanted across the side of her head, and she wore gloves and carried a light coat on her arm.

She smiled, brushed my lips lightly with hers, and started to fumble at her bag. I gave the driver some money. I didn't know how much, but it appeared to satisfy him. He turned and went down the walk. Then we were inside, and I pushed the door shut with my shoulder, and put down the bag.

She broke it up, finally, and gasped. 'Jerry! After all——'

'Let me look at you,' I said. I held her at arm's length. I'd smeared her lipstick quite badly and tilted the hat a little out of position, but there was no doubt of it. She was the smartest-looking and the loveliest woman on earth.

I told her so. Or started to.

'Are you drunk?' she asked.

'No,' I said. 'I haven't even had a drink. God, how I've missed you. I can't keep my hands off you.'

She smiled. 'You *must* have been working long hours. No girls at all?'

'Look,' I said. 'I'm not getting through to you. It's not girls. It's you——'

'Jerry, you're talking gibberish,' she said. 'And could we sit down?'

'I'm sorry,' I said. I led her to the sofa, and sat down beside her. I took her in my arms again. She tried to fend me off, shaking her head protestingly. 'I think I must be getting too old to cope with the under-thirty type of wolf.'

'Listen, Marian,' I said. 'Damn it, will you listen to me?' I removed the hat and dropped it on the coffee table, and put my hand against her cheek, turning her face and looking at the smooth dark line of her hair and the incredible blue eyes. I was overcome again with that crazy yearning to imprison and possess every last bit of her. I kissed her again, and it was the wildest and most wonderful thing I'd ever known.

She stirred. 'Jerry, what on earth is the matter with you?'

'I love you,' I said. 'I should think that would be obvious to a fourteen-year-old girl——'

'Don't be ridiculous.' She tried to pull back. I held her more tightly. 'Jerry,' she protested, 'this is hardly the time——'

'Will you, for the love of God, listen to me a minute?' I said. 'And try not to kick my teeth out, for once? I'm in love with you. I'm absolutely crazy about you. God knows I missed you while you were gone, but I didn't realize until I saw you coming up that walk just how much you did mean to me——'

She tried to break in.

'Don't interrupt,' I said. 'I'm going to get through to you some way, if it takes the rest of the night. I've tried to

tell you before how wonderful I think you are, but you seem to think it's just some sort of conditioned reflex because I noticed you weren't wearing a beard. There must be some way I can make you understand. Listen. You're what I came back for, when I ran off to New York. I know that now. All I want out of this business is you, and I don't want to spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder for the police——'

She stiffened in my arms. 'What are you saying?'

'That we're going to call this thing off. It's too dangerous. And it's crazy. I want you, and I don't want to be running and hiding all the time like an animal. I realize I'm not one of the solidier types of prospect for the vine-covered mortgage and the lawn mower, but I can hold a job when I want to. I want to marry you——'

She broke free and pushed away from me. She laughed, but the sound of it was more like that of a bad ski-ing accident. 'You want us to go steady, is that it? Oh, my God. I wonder how I'd look in crinoline petticoats and bobby socks. Or maybe you could just introduce me as your mother——'

I grabbed her arm and shook her. 'Marian! Stop it! For Christ's sake, I never heard of anybody who could make such a Federal case out of being thirty-four years old. You don't look twenty-eight.'

Her face was distorted with contempt or bitterness; I wasn't sure which. 'You fool! Don't you even know yet? Didn't you hear me say I'd already graduated from college when we got into the war? I'm referring to the *Second World War*. Or didn't you study that one in school? Do you have any idea how long ago that was? I'm not thirty-four. I'm thirty-eight years old.'

She began to laugh again. I caught her, but she turned her face away and went on laughing. 'I had one last little

shred of dignity left, and you want me to throw that away and start cradle-robbing——'

I caught the turning and twisting face between my hands and held it still so she had to look at me. 'I don't give a damn if you're thirty-eight,' I said savagely. 'Or fifty-eight, or ninety-eight. All I know is what I see and feel. You're the loveliest woman, probably, that I've ever known, and the smoothest, and there's a grace about you that makes me catch my breath when I look at you. I think you begin being feminine where all other women leave off. When you go out of a room, you leave it empty and when you come back you re-decorate it——'

'Will you stop it?' she lashed at me. 'Even if I were capable of ever loving anybody again, do you think I'd marry a man ten years younger than I am, and as attractive as you are, and cringe every time people looked at us and wondered what I'd used to buy you with? I'll assure you, laddie boy, I don't look twenty-eight to women. And I can't compete in that division any more. I've just had that demonstrated to me, quite publicly and convincingly.'

'Forget that meat-headed Chapman for a minute,' I said. 'If he's too stupid to know what he had, that's his hard luck, and he'll find it out soon enough——'

'Precisely. In about four hours.'

'No! Dammit, no! It's dangerous, and I don't want you to do it. Chapman hasn't got anything you need, or even want——'

She broke in coldly. 'I beg to differ with you. He has something I want, and intend to have—a lot of money I helped him make for both of us. That's the only thing left now. I suppose it's utterly impossible for you to understand, being a man and a very young one, but I'm through. Finished. I'm all over. I'm something that's

already happened. If I started now and worked at it night and day, by the time I could feel like a woman again, I won't even be one. Not an operating model, anyway, or one that anybody but the utterly desperate would have. I poured the last six years of my life into an ageing adolescent, and all I've got left to show for it is humiliation. There are probably women more philosophical than I am who could adjust to that and absorb it and come out of it healthy again. But I can't. Maybe it's unfortunate but I don't even intend to try. I have nothing more to lose, and I'm not going to stand in the wreckage of my own life like some placid and uncomprehending cow and see them get away with it.'

'I'm not going to let you do it——

'Don't be an idiot!' she said furiously. 'There's no risk at all. And doesn't the money mean anything to you?'

'Yes. It does. It means plenty. But I've just discovered you mean more. And if that sounds like something out of a shampoo ad, I'm sorry, but there it is.'

'And this is Jerome Langston Forbes?' she asked pityingly.

I sighed. 'All right, rub it in. This is Jerry Forbes, the angle boy. The guy who discovered before he was twenty that this place is just a nut-hatch for the rest of the universe. And maybe when you stop to think about it, it still is. After all these years I finally go overboard completely for a girl, and I have to pick the one who's decided to throw away her union card in the female sex.' I lit a cigarette, and stood up.

'Then you won't help me?' she asked.

'No,' I said. I went in and sat down on the bed. I felt like hell. I stretched out, with the ashtray on my chest, and looked up at the ceiling. There didn't seem to be any answer.

I was still lying there ten minutes later when I heard her come into the room. She lay down across the bed with her face very near mine. 'I'm sorry, Jerry,' she said. 'I guess I didn't really grasp what you were saying. When you have nothing left inside but bitterness, a lot of things don't come through very well.'

'It's all right,' I said.

Her eyes looked into mine from a distance of a few inches. 'What if I would go away with you afterwards?'

'You would?'

'Yes. God knows why you'd want me, but if you still do, I'll go.'

I thought about it for a minute, wavering. 'It still scares me. You know what we're fooling with.'

'Yes. And you know how we're going to do it. Nothing can go wrong.' She smiled faintly, and touched my lips with a finger. 'You understand it'll have to be a long time afterwards? Maybe a year. And that it'll have to be somewhere a long way off, where there's no chance that anybody who knew him will ever hear your voice.'

'Of course.'

'All right. I have a little money, too. We'll have well over two hundred thousand. Somewhere in the eastern Mediterranean, or the Aegean. Or if you want to fish, somewhere in the tropics. Ceylon, perhaps. Just the two of us. And no strings attached. When you get tired of me——'

I drew a finger along her cheek. 'I'd never get tired of you.'

'You will, when you get old enough to need younger women.'

'But I wouldn't have to wait a full year?' I asked. 'I mean, before I can even see you again?'

'No. We can meet somewhere after I'm sure I'm not being watched. In a month or so. Will you do it, Jerry?'

I thought of that dream I'd had when she was trying to jump off the bridge, and felt cold in the pit of my stomach. Maybe it was a warning that something *could* go wrong. But I knew I was whipped. By this time I was conditioned to taking her on any terms I could get her.

'All right,' I said. 'Let's get started.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

I LOOKED at my watch for the hundredth time, conscious of the increasing tightness of my nerves. The waiting was bad; there was too much time to think. It was forty-five minutes past midnight. I was in the hired car, parked on Collins Avenue across from the entrance to the Dauphine. This was another of those glorified motor hotels of the Gold Coast Strip, about two blocks from the Golden Horn. He had a reservation. She'd made it for him, along with his fishing reservations at Marathon, in the Keys.

I lit another cigarette, and went on watching the oncoming traffic, which was definitely thinning now. I'd already checked the area for call-boxes, to be sure I could get to one when I wanted it. I nervously looked at the time again. I'd been here an hour and a half. Maybe he wouldn't drive all the way through from Mobile in one day. His plans could have changed in the two weeks since their bitter fight and her resignation, and he might be going somewhere else. He could have been in a wreck—I came alert. It was another Cadillac.

Well, I'd seen at least a hundred so far; there was no shortage of them in Miami Beach. But this was one of the big ones, and it was a light grey hardtop. Out-of-state licence plate. Then I could see the pelican on it. The car was turning into the driveway of the Dauphine. It was Chapman, all right. And he was alone. I exhaled softly. That was the thing we had to know for sure. If he was going to live it up this trip, he hadn't picked up a girl so far.

The Cadillac stopped in the circular drive before the glass front wall of the lobby, partially screened from the

street by the boxes of tropical vegetation bearing coloured lights. I got out and crossed the street.

Chapman had already gone inside, and a porter with a luggage barrow was removing three large expensive-looking bags from the boot of the car. I went into the lobby and turned towards the two telephone booths at the left rear, beside the archway that opened into the dining room. Nobody paid any attention to me. Chapman was standing at the desk. He was just as she had described him. We looked nothing alike except that we were the same height and—within the limits of the average description—the same build. He wore a lightweight gabardine suit and a cocoa straw hat, white shirt, and a conservatively striped tie. And the glasses, of course.

‘Reservation for Harris Chapman,’ he said brusquely. It wasn’t a question; it was a statement of fact.

I didn’t hear the clerk’s reply, but he turned away to check. I had reached the telephones now. I went through the motions of looking up a number, and just before I stepped inside I glanced toward the desk again. The clerk had returned. He was smiling as he pushed across the registry card. Then he handed Chapman an envelope. So far, so good. But I had to see what he did with it. If he shoved it in a pocket, he might forget it. He glanced at it curiously, and then set it on the desk while he registered. He’d recognized the handwriting by this time, I thought. It was from Marian. She had written it just before she left for Nassau. I closed the door of the booth and quickly dialled the apartment. She answered on the first ring.

‘He’s here,’ I said quietly. ‘And he got the letter.’

‘What did he do with it?’

‘Nothing, yet. Wait.’ I turned and glanced toward the desk again. ‘He’s opened it.’

'Good,' she said. 'He'll call when he gets up to the room.'

I wasn't so sure. He'd just driven over seven hundred miles, and would be ready to fall in bed. But she knew him inside out, and should be able to guess his reaction pretty well. The letter was an implied but very arrogantly worded blackmail threat. She had something to discuss with him relative to his 1955 income-tax return, and would be waiting for him to call, not later than tonight.

'He failed to report fifty-five thousand dollars,' she'd explained. 'It's pretty well covered, but he knows how they dig once they're tipped off. And that informers are paid.'

I glanced around again. Chapman had shoved the letter in his coat pocket and was striding toward the booths. 'Hang up,' I said quickly. 'He's going to call right now.'

The phone clicked and went dead. He stalked into the other booth and banged the door shut. I went on talking, ad libbing a conversation with an imaginary girl. He was dialling.

'Hello, Marian? Harris.' I could hear him perfectly. 'I thought they said you were in New York. What the hell's this let——? Yeah, I just checked in. Look, if this is some kind of gag to get me to come out to your apartment, I thought we'd agreed that was all over. It wouldn't change anything, and I don't see why we have to embarrass ourselves. . . . *What? . . . What's that?*'

There was a longer pause.

'Oh, so that's the way it is?' he said curtly. 'By God, I didn't think you'd stoop to a thing like this. I guess Coral was right. . . . You know damn well that return's been checked and double-checked, and they've never found a thing wrong with it. . . . Never mind what you think

. . . If you need money, why didn't you take that six months' pay I offered you? . . . No, I'm not coming out there. I'm tired. I've been driving all day. . . . What proof? . . . You haven't got any proof, and you know it.'

I heard him hang up and slam out of the booth. I pulled down the hook, dropped in another dime, and dialled her again.

'What do you think?' I asked softly, when she answered.

'He'll come, as soon as he thinks it over. Let me know.'

'Right,' I said.

When I came out of the booth, Chapman was entering the corridor at the other side of the lobby, followed by the porter with his bags. I went back to the car, and lit a cigarette. The Cadillac had been parked in the area off to the left of the main building. Ten minutes went by. Maybe she was wrong. Then an empty cab turned into the driveway. In a minute or two it came out the exit, crossed the traffic to this side of the street, and started south, the way it had come. There was a man in it, wearing a hat. It was Chapman.

I looked at my watch. It had taken me fifteen minutes to drive up, but the traffic had lessened considerably by now. Call it ten. I got out and crossed the street again, and walked down about half a block to the bar I'd noted before. It had a booth, and I didn't want to go back to the lobby again unless I had to.

There were only three or four customers in the place, and the booth was empty. I was tight as a violin string now, and couldn't seem to take a deep breath. I ordered a shot of straight whisky, downed it, and went back to the phone. I closed the door, and dialled. She answered immediately.

'He left here five minutes ago, in a cab,' I said.

'Good,' she replied. 'Remember, wait two minutes from the time I hang up. I'll be in the kitchen, getting out the ice cubes.'

'Right,' I said. The drink had loosened me a little now, but it was very hot in the booth and I was sweating. She went on talking. She seemed perfectly calm. The minutes dragged by.

'I think I hear the cab,' she said.

I waited. Then I heard the doorbell, very faintly. The line went dead. Chapman was at the front door.

I checked the time, pulled down the hook, and dropped in another dime to get the dial tone. I looked back out at the bar. No one was near enough to hear any of it through the door. Just before the two minutes were up, I started dialling. It rang twice.

'Hello.' It was Chapman, all right. She'd got him to answer.

'Mrs. Marian Forsyth,' I said brusquely. 'Is she there?'

'Just a minute.'

I heard him call her, but not her reply. Then he came on again. 'She's busy at the moment. Who's calling?'

'Chapman,' I said. 'Harris Chapman——'

'What?'

Most people, of course, have no idea how their voices and their speech sound to others, but he did. He was accustomed to using dictating devices and recorders.

'Harris Chapman,' I repeated with the same curt impatience. 'From Thomaston, Louisiana. She knows me——'

'Are you crazy?'

I cut in on him. 'Will you please call Mrs. Forsyth to the phone? I haven't got all night.'

'So you're Chapman, are you? Where are you calling from?'

'What the hell is this?' I barked into the phone. 'I'm calling from the Dauphine. I just checked in here. I've driven seven hundred and thirty miles today, and I'm tired, and I don't feel like playing games. Maybe *you* want to talk to me about my nineteen-fifty-five income-tax return, is that it? Well, it just happens I'm an attorney, my friend, and I know a little about the law, and about shakedowns. Now, put her on, or I'll turn this letter of hers over to the police right now.'

'What in the name of God? *Marian*——'

I heard the phonograph come up in the background then, softly at first, and then louder. It was a song that had come out the summer Keith had gone mad—*The Music Goes Round and Round*. Shortly before they'd given up and had him committed for treatment, he'd locked himself in his room one day and played the record for nineteen hours without stopping.

'Listen!' I snapped. 'What are you people up to? What's that music——?'

He was still there. I heard him gasp.

Oh, the music goes round and round . . . and it comes out here. . . .

'Turn that off!' I said harshly. 'Who told you about Keith? She's been coaching you. You even sound like me. What's that woman trying to do to me? I offered her six months' pay. . . .'

'Marian,' he shouted, 'for the love of Christ, who is this man?'

I couldn't hear her reply, of course, but I knew what it was, and the way she said it. 'Why, Harris Chapman, obviously.'

The shots weren't too loud, mere exclamation points

above the level of the music. There were two very close together, and then one more. The phone made a crashing noise, as if it had struck the edge of the table, and I heard him fall.

Oh, you press the middle valve down. . . .

Something else fell. And then there was nothing but the music, and a rhythmic tapping sound, as if the telephone receiver was swinging gently back and forth, bumping the leg of the table.

Bump . . . bump . . .

. . . and the music goes round and round . . . yoo-oo-ohoo. . . .

I made it in a little over ten minutes. As soon as I'd got out in the fresh air I was all right. She'd probably fainted, but she'd come around. I parked a block away. The front door was unlocked. I slipped inside and closed it.

One bridge lamp was burning in a corner, and the lights were on in the kitchen. She wasn't in here. I sighed with relief. The phonograph had been shut off, and the phone was back on its cradle. The apartment was completely silent except for the humming of the air-conditioner. He was lying face down beside the table which held the telephone. I hurried through to the bedroom. She was in the bathroom, standing with her hands braced on the sides of the wash basin, looking at her face in the mirror. Apparently she'd started to brush her teeth, for some reason, for the toothbrush was lying in the basin where she'd dropped it. She was very pale. I took her arm. She turned, stared at me blankly, and then rubbed a hand across her face. Comprehension returned to her eyes. 'I'm all right,' she said. There was no tremor in her voice.

I led her out and sat her on the bed, and knelt beside

her. 'Just hold on for a few minutes, and we'll be out of here. You sit right there. Would you like a drink?'

'No,' she said. 'I'd rather not.' She spoke precisely without raising her voice. I had an impression it was nothing but iron self-control, and that she was walking very carefully along the edge of screaming. That part of it, however, I couldn't help her with.

The tarpaulin I'd bought was in a broom closet in the kitchen. I carried it into the living room, spread it on the rug, and rolled him on to it. I didn't like looking at his face, so I threw a fold of the canvas over it. There was blood on his shirt, and some on the rug where he'd lain. I went through his pockets, taking everything out—wallet, traveller's cheques, car keys, room key from the Dauphine, small address book, the letter from Marian, cigarette holder, lighter, cigarettes, and a small plastic vial of some kind of pills. I tore up the letter and shoved it back in his coat pocket, along with the pills and the cigarette holder. His glasses had fallen off. I put them in his pocket also. All the other items I placed on the coffee table. He wore no rings. I left his watch on his wrist. The gun, a small .32, was on the rug near the phonograph. I put it in another coat pocket.

I rolled him in the tarpaulin and pulled him out into the kitchen, beside the back door. I cut two strips off the canvas to use for ropes, doubled him into the foetal position, and bound him. I was shaking badly now, and my stomach was acting up again. I leaned against the sink, poured a drink of whisky from the bottle in a cupboard, and downed it. In a minute I felt a little better.

I filled a pan with water, located a sponge, and scrubbed at the blood stain on the living-room rug. It took nearly ten minutes and four pans of water. I knew a lot of it had gone through to the pad beneath, and that the rug would

show a water stain when it dried, but I could take care of that later. I'd have the whole rug shampooed. I washed the pan, and the sink, and turned out the kitchen light. It was a relief to get away from him.

She was just getting up from the bed. I took her in my arms. 'I'm all right now,' she said. 'I'm sorry I broke up that way.'

'Everything's under control,' I told her. 'He had the room key. That was the only thing I was worried about. What time is your flight?'

'I'm wait-listed at five-fifteen, and confirmed at six-thirty.'

I looked at my watch. It was five minutes to two. She'd have a long wait, alone, at the airport, but it couldn't be helped. She couldn't stay here. She seemed to be in full control of herself, and rational. She put on some lipstick, and her hat, and I closed the overnight case and found her coat, gloves, and purse. I dropped the Dauphine room key in my pocket. There was horror in her eyes just for an instant as we went out through the living room.

'The car's about a block away,' I said. 'I didn't want any more traffic in and out of here than we had to have.'

She made no reply. I turned out the lights and locked the door. When we got to the car, I lit her a cigarette. She remained silent all the way up Collins Avenue. I reached over once and took her hand. It was like ice, even through the mesh of the glove.

I parked about a block from the Dauphine. Turning to her, I took her face between my hands, and asked, 'I'll be about ten minutes; are you sure you'll be all right?'

'Yes, of course,' she replied, in that same quiet, beautifully controlled sort of way.

I walked up past the Dauphine and entered the driveway at the exit end. There was an extensive parking area

here, going back along the side of this wing of the building. About two-thirds of the way back there was a doorway. I entered it, and was in one of the ground-floor corridors. I took the key from my pocket. It was No. 226. At the end of the corridor there was a self-service elevator and a stairway. I took the stairway. In the corridor above, I began checking the numbers—216—214—I was going the wrong way. I went back around the corner. A waiter came past, carrying a tray. I swung the key absently, and nodded. He smiled, and went on. 222—224—— Here it was. The corridor was empty now. I unlocked the door, slipped inside, and closed it.

The curtains were drawn over the window at the other end of the room. A light was burning on the night table beside the bed, and the bathroom lights were on. One of the three matching fibreglass suitcases was on the luggage stand, unopened, and the others were on the floor beside it. I didn't like the look of that. He'd been up here approximately ten minutes without unpacking anything, so maybe he'd been on the phone. He might have called Coral Blaine to tell her he'd arrived. We hadn't believed he would, because of the late hour. But if he had, *had he mentioned the letter from Marian?*

Well, there was nothing I could do about it at the moment, and I had plenty of other armed hand grenades to juggle without worrying about that one. I rumbled the bed, and reached for the phone. The front office should know he'd been out; they'd probably called the cab for him. Play it that way.

The operator answered.

'Desk, please,' I said.

'Yes, sir.' Then she added quickly. 'Oh, Mr. Chapman, would you like me to try that Thomaston call again now?'

I breathed softly in relief. 'No. Just cancel. I'll call in the morning.'

'Yes, sir.'

The night clerk came on. 'Desk.'

'Chapman,' I said. 'In two-two-six. There haven't been any messages for me?'

'Uuuuh—let's see. No, sir, not a thing.'

'Okay,' I said. 'I won't want to be disturbed until about noon. Would you notify the switchboard not to put any calls through?'

'Yes, sir. And just hang the sign on the doorknob. The maids won't come in.'

'Thank you,' I said. I got the DO NOT DISTURB sign off the dresser, switched off the lights, and peered out. The corridor was clear. I draped the sign on the knob, made sure the door was locked, and walked along to the stairs. I met no one. When I was on the sidewalk in front I breathed freely again. One more hurdle was past.

I swung the car around, went back down Collins Avenue, and took the North Bay Causeway, headed for the airport. She sat perfectly erect and composed beside me, but she spoke only once during the whole trip.

'I took advantage of you,' she said musingly. 'God forgive me for that. I'm sorry, Jerry.'

'What?' I asked. 'What do you mean, you took advantage of me?'

She made no reply.

Just before we reached the terminal, I pulled to the curb and parked. It was ten minutes to three.

'What day is this?' I asked quickly.

'Thursday, November fourteen. That isn't necessary; I tell you I'm perfectly all right.'

I had to be sure. She was on her own from here on. 'Tell me your schedule.'

'I leave here at five-fifteen or six-thirty. Either way, I'll be back in my room in New York before noon. I check out of the hotel tomorrow at one p.m. and fly to New Orleans. I'll be in Thomaston Saturday morning. From then on, it's exactly as we have it written down.'

'Right,' I said.

'You'll make certain about the tapes, won't you? And under no circumstances are you to try to call me.'

'Don't worry about the tapes. Or about anything. I can handle it. We'll say good-bye here. Then I'll swing in, drop you at the terminal, and run. Okay?'

'Yes.' She turned, her face lifted to mine.

I kissed her, holding her very tightly for a moment, and whispered against her cheek. 'I'll just be going through the motions until I'm with you again. That's all I'm going to say now. Break. And let's go.'

I swung in, stopped in front of the terminal, and helped her out. She lifted a hand, turned, and went inside.

It was three-thirty-five when I backed into the driveway beside the apartment. The house beyond the high and shadowy wall was dark, and the streets were deserted. I stopped short of the garage doors, cut the ignition and lights, and got out. I unlocked the boot, and eased it open. Letting myself in at the front, I went through to the bathroom, and changed into fishing clothes. I went out into the kitchen, without turning on the lights, and poured another drink. I dreaded this part of it.

I wasn't even sure I could do it, except for one thing—I had to. I weighed a hundred and eighty and he a hundred and ninety-five. But I was in fairly good condition. I eased the kitchen door open, pulled him through it to the edge of the concrete slab, and bent my knees to get my arms round him. Three minutes later the boot was

closed again and I was draped across it, trembling and sweaty and sick at my stomach. They say madmen don't know their own strength. Neither do desperate ones.

I slipped back into the kitchen, closed and locked the door, turned out the light in the bedroom, and went out the front. I opened the garage door, backed out, and coupled on the trailer. By this time I'd probably wakened the people in the house beyond the wall, but it was all right. Florida was full of fishermen waking their neighbours at four in the morning. I drove out into the street.

I wanted to stop for some coffee, but didn't dare. I didn't know how soon after five it would start growing light. When I was beyond Homestead and Florida City on the open highway I opened the car up to seventy. It was five-ten and still dark when I crossed on to Key Largo. I checked my speedometer at the junction of the two roads, and swung left. In a few minutes I came to the first launching site. I swung my headlights to get a look at it, pulled up, and backed down to the water's edge. I had to get out once to judge the distance.

In a moment I had the boat off. I pulled it around and beached it, and turned off the car's lights. The east was grey now, and I noticed for the first time that it was almost calm. That was good; I could go far out, off soundings. Mosquitos buzzed around my face. I steeled myself, unlocked the boot, and was just raising the lid, when I tensed up, listening. A car was coming. I slammed it. Headlights swept over me. The car came on, slowed almost to a stop, and then went on. It was towing a boat.

The sound of it died away. I yanked open the boot, and pawed blindly at the canvas. Somehow, the hated and brutal weight was in my arms again, and I staggered to

the side of the boat. I ran back and brought the concrete blocks, two at a time, and frantically felt round for the wire and the pliers. I drove the car out until the trailer was clear of the launching area, and parked it near the road. I was locking it when headlights burst over me again.

The car stopped. It was towing a boat too. A man got out, said, 'Good morning,' and switched on a flashlight.

My mouth was dry with fear. I forced it open at last, made some kind of reply, and started in motion towards the boat. He was directing the driver of the car, throwing the flashlight beam toward the water. It swept over the boat.

'Nice looking outfit you got there,' he said. 'Get in the stern, and I'll push you off.'

'It's all right,' I said. 'Thanks just the same.'

He was still coming towards me with the flashlight. I caught the bow of the boat, and heaved. It shot out. I clambered aboard, getting my feet wet. I stayed in the bow, between him and Chapman's body, while I picked up an oar and hurriedly poled my way out another fifty feet. He had turned away now and was directing the driver of the car. I sat down in the stern, shaking all over, and started the motor.

The east was light now, but the visibility was still poor. I headed seawards, running at idling speed and watching for obstructions. Off to my left a light flashed. A west-bound tanker went past inside the Stream, still two or three miles ahead of me. It was full daylight by the time I was past the line of reefs. The boat pitched lazily on the long ground-swell rolling up from the south-east. I went on. The tanker was far to the westward, and I could see nothing of the other two boats. I was in the Stream now, completely alone, and probably near the hundred-fathom curve. Key Largo was down on the horizon, and visible

only when I crested a swell. I cut the motor and reached for the wire and the concrete blocks.

The boat heaved upward on the greasy swell, and shipped some water as he went over. The sun was just coming up.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I STOPPED to turn back the boat and trailer on the way into town, and it was nine-fifteen when I got back to the apartment. I had one more drink, made a pot of coffee, and showered and shaved.

I couldn't remember when I'd had anything to eat, but I wasn't hungry. I was running on nerve now, but I was too tense and keyed up to be tired. The real test was yet to come. I had to call Coral Blaine in about two hours, and if I failed to pass, Marian Forsyth and I were dead. I wondered how she was feeling at the moment, knowing it all depended on me and that we couldn't even communicate any more.

I dressed in a lightweight flannel suit, white shirt, and a conservative tie on the order of the one Chapman had worn. I put my horn-rim glasses in a coat pocket, and then stowed away a packet of the filter cigarettes, the cigarette holder, and Chapman's lighter, which was one of the butane jobs. Then his wallet, the folder of traveller's cheques, the little address book, his car keys, and the Dauphine room key. But I had one more act to perform as Jerry Forbes. I had to return the car. I removed the hire deposit slip from my own wallet and put it in a pocket.

The straw hat was slightly too large, so I cut a strip of newspaper and folded it inside the sweat band. I put the seven rolls of tape and the other information in the briefcase she'd bought before leaving for Nassau, closed the recorder, turned off the air-conditioner, and took one last look round. I drove over to Miami, turned in the car, walked up a block, caught a cab, and gave an address on Collins Avenue near the Dauphine.

I got out a block away, and walked back, carrying the recorder and the briefcase. Entering the driveway at the exit end, I went up through the parking area and entered the side door as I had last night. There were a few guests in the corridors now, and I passed one of the maids, and a waiter pushing a room-service trolley, but no one paid any attention to me. The corridor before No. 226 was empty except for a furry fat man in bathing trunks. I unlocked the door and slipped inside, removing the DO NOT DISTURB sign from the knob.

It was eleven-ten, and I was now Harris Chapman. I was up there on the tight rope I had to walk for twelve days—provided I got past the first step.

I removed my jacket, shirt, and tie, and hung them in the closet, took off my shoes, and picked up the phone and called Room Service. I ordered a pot of coffee, orange juice, and a *Miami Herald*.

I rumbled the bed some more, went into the bathroom, washed my face, turned the shower on very hot for a minute or two until the room began to get steamy, rubbed one of the fresh bath towels over the wet tiles until it was damp, and draped it carelessly back on the rack. I got the glasses out of my jacket and put them on. They were mildly corrective reading glasses she'd convinced an optometrist she needed because of headaches, and weren't too hard to put up with. They and the moustache changed my appearance amazingly. I looked some five years older.

I opened the bag that was on the luggage rack. It was the companion bag to a two-suiter, filled with shirts, underwear, socks, handkerchiefs, and so on. I pulled out a pair of pyjamas, wadded them, and tossed them across the bed. A full bottle of Scotch was nestled among the clothes. I thought of what Marian had called him—an

ageing adolescent. It seemed incredible she'd been in love with him, but maybe he'd been different before he looked up and saw middle age and panicked.

There were some papers in the top flap. I pulled them out, and one envelope was exactly what I was looking for. It was a statement from Webster & Adcock, his brokerage firm in New Orleans, itemizing the status of his account as of November first. I ran my eye down it, and whistled. She hadn't been exaggerating. *1000 shares Columbia Gas . . . 500 shares Du Pont 450 Preferential . . . 100 AT&T bonds . . . 500 shares PG&E common . . .* It went on. The last item was \$22,376.50 in cash. There were three more of the same envelopes containing verifications of later transactions. I shoved them all back in the bag. Checking it over in detail could wait. Coral Blaine was the pitfall I had to get past now.

The other envelope was postmarked Marathon, Florida, over a month ago, and contained a letter from Captain Wilbur of the charter-boat *Blue Water III*, confirming Chapman's reservations on November 15, 16, 17, and again on 21, 22, and 23.

Remembering I was in character now, I went over and picked up the phone and asked for Room Service again.

'Hello? Room Service? Chapman, in two-two-six,' I said irritably. 'That boy hasn't shown up with my order— Oh? Okay. Thanks.'

He knocked on the door almost by the time I'd hung up. I let him in with the trolley, carefully added up the bill, added a tip, and signed it. He departed. I poured a cup of coffee, and went on with my investigation. The second suitcase held two lightweight suits, a sports jacket, several pairs of trousers, and some other miscellaneous items of clothing, a half-dozen bottles of different kinds of pills, and a small leather kit containing all his toilet

articles. The third was mostly fishing clothes. It also contained a camera, and a gift of some kind, still wrapped.

It felt like a book. I tore it open. It was a volume on salt-water fishing by Kip Farrington, and the flyleaf was inscribed, 'With all my love, Coral.' I started to drop it back in the bag. Something fell out of it. It was a plain piece of white paper on which was written the single word, 'Isle'. It puzzled me. Apparently she'd stuck it in there between the pages. I held the book up and shook it. Two more slips fell out, along with a four by six photograph of a young blonde girl in a bathing suit, standing on tiptoes. She was very pretty, but as standardized—pose and all—as an interchangeable part. She made me think of a composite picture. I looked at the other two slips of paper. Each had one word written on it. 'View' and 'Of'. I frowned. Then they rearranged themselves in my mind, and I shook my head. 'Isle of View.' For this he'd jilted Marian Forsyth. That forty country must be rough.

His wallet held a little over seven hundred dollars, two more photographs of Coral Blaine, driver's licence, eight or ten credit cards of various kinds, and his Chapman Enterprises business cards, but nothing with a picture of him. I unsnapped the folder of traveller's cheques. There were forty-eight of them, all hundreds. He didn't exactly go around barefoot, for a two weeks' vacation. Well, he was a millionaire, it was probably all deductible if he had an imaginative tax man, and big-game fishing came high. To say nothing of nineteen-year-old call girls.

I was stalling now, and I knew it. I'd been through all his things, and if I kept inventing reasons for putting it off I'd start to lose my nerve, and then I *would* flub it. I broke the seal on the bottle of Scotch, had one fair-sized drink, and reached for the phone. I was tight across the chest.

The operator answered. 'Long Distance,' I said.

‘Thomaston, Louisiana. The number is six-two-five-two-five. Personal call to Miss Coral Blaine.’

‘Yes, sir. One moment, please.’

I waited. *Remember, two pet names. Remember, she has a very Southern accent.* No, that didn’t matter. This was personal, I didn’t have to worry about ‘recognizing’ the wrong girl’s voice. *Remember, just got up. Groggy. Hard drive.*

Far off, a feminine voice said, ‘Chapman Enterprises.’

Receptionist. Mrs. English. Widow. 36. Brown hair. Pleasant. Son in high school. Wendell. . . .

‘Miss Coral Blaine,’ an operator said. ‘Miami Beach is calling.’

‘One moment, please.’

Hates Marian. ‘Adores’ things. Chides me for swearing. Argument about scope and magnitude of wedding, settled now, her favour. Honeymoon definitely Palm Springs, Acapulco out, loathes fishing. Got her talking about bridal parties. Gown. Attendants. . . .

‘Go ahead, please.’

‘Harris, darling—’

‘Angel, how are you?’ I said.

‘Just fine, darling, but I’ve been so *worried*. You didn’t call last night, and here I’ve been imaginin’ wreck and hurricanes and deadly females carryin’ you off—’

‘I tried to call you. When I checked in here at Miami Beach. At one a.m.—that’d be midnight your time. But there was no answer.’

‘I just *knew* it! I kept trying to tell that crazy Bonnie Sue Wentworth that Miami was ahead of us—’

Bonnie Sue clicked in my mind.

‘—Henry’s in Chicago, you know, at that engineers’ convention or whatever it is, so after the movie we went out to the club, and I kept telling her I had to get back

because you'd call, but she said Miami was *behind* us——'

'Bonnie Sue's having a good day when she can tell whether it's daylight or dark,' I said. 'And I wish you wouldn't ride with her. Any husband that would let a featherweight like that drive a Thunderbird has got a grudge against her, or the human race——'

'Harris, she wasn't drivin' the Bird. Heavens, they traded that in, remember?'

So. Don't get too cocky.

'Well, the hell with Bonnie Sue. I want to know how you——'

'Harris! The very idea!'

'I'm sorry, angel,' I said. 'But how are you? And how's everything at the office?'

'Just fine. And, remember, I said I wasn't going to bother you with old office details on your vacation. The only thing that's come up important is a letter from those lawyers in Washington about the radio station. There's some more forms to fill in.'

'Yes. That's the application for an increase in power,' I said. 'Shoot 'em over to Wingard. If he has any questions, I'll get in touch with him later. But, look, angel, suppose I call you tonight? I just woke up and haven't even dressed yet. And before I drive on down to Marathon there's a real estate man I want to see.'

'That'd be wonderful, darling. I'll be waiting.'

'Say about eight, your time. And thanks a million for the book. It's a good one.'

'You fibber. I bet you haven't even looked at it.'

'I'll just take that bet.' I winced. 'Isle of View, too.'

'Why, you precious. You did open it.'

When I'd hung up, I poured one more small drink of the Scotch, and sighed. How could I have been worried about that? Then a very cold hand closed around my

insides, and I cursed myself. *Don't get careless.* So she's an idiot. But don't forget, they were engaged; there's a whole area of shared experience nobody could brief you on, not even Marian Forsyth. And just one little slip, one wrong word, can do it.

I looked at my watch. It was still only a few minutes past twelve. It would be better not to check out until at least one; that would be exactly twelve hours from the time he'd checked in, and there'd be no chance at all any of the same staff would be on duty. The whole switch depended on that. Now would be a good time to hit Chris.

I poured some more coffee, and dug the Webster & Adcock envelopes out of the bag. Spreading out the itemized end-of-the-month statement, I corrected it and brought it up to date with the slips verifying subsequent transactions. Since the first of the month—and that would be about the time Marian had left him—he had sold five hundred shares of Consolidated Edison, and in three separate transactions had bought a total of ten thousand shares of some cheap stock called Warwick Petroleum. This was listed on the American Exchange, and had been bought at prices ranging from $3\frac{1}{2}$ to $3\frac{1}{8}$. I just had a hunch Chris had been unhappy about that. Marian had ~~got~~ him to switch over to high grade preferential and good solid utilities before prices had started to sag, and here he was plunging to the tune of better than thirty thousand dollars on some cheap speculation before she'd hardly got out of sight.

I crossed off the Consolidated Edison, added the Warwick, and adjusted the cash. The latter was now \$12,741.50. Opening the *Miami Herald* to the financial page, I went down the list, checking it off against yesterday's closing prices on the Stock Exchange. I added it all

up. It came to roughly a hundred and eighty-seven thousand. I whistled softly. A hundred and seventy-five thousand of that was ours.

I thought of the places we'd go. Athens, Istanbul, Mallorca. And the fishing places—New Zealand, and Cabo Blanco. Passports would be no problem; we wouldn't be fugitives. But it really didn't matter where we went, as long as I was with her.

I snapped out of it. It would be at least a month before I could see her again, and I was in no position to be goofing off, dreaming about her. I reached for the phone.

'Operator, I'd like to make another long-distance call. This one's to New Orleans——'

'Yes, sir. And the number?'

I gave it to her, and added, 'Personal call to Mr. Chris Lundgren.'

'Thank you. One moment, please.'

I heard the operator at Webster & Adcock, and then Lundgren's voice.

'Chris?' I said. 'Chapman. How's Warwick doing this morning?'

'Oh, good morning, Mr. Chapman. The girl said you're in Miami Beach already——'

'That's right,' I said shortly. 'But has there been any sign of a rally in Warwick? I see it closed yesterday at two seven-eighths.'

'No-o——' He sounded far from enthusiastic. 'It's about the same, but there's very little activity in it. To tell you the truth, Mr. Chapman, I still can't quite go along with you on it. It carries a lot of risk——'

So I was right. I cut in brusquely. 'But, goddammit, Chris, there's risk in anything there's profit in. I got where I am now by taking risks. I'm not some old woman using the dividends from a few shares of AT & T to buy food

for her cat. Christ, with the tax set-up we've got, what good is income to me? I need capital gains.'

'Of course, Mr. Chapman. But I just don't see Warwick Petroleum. In a healthy market it might pay off as a speculation, though I'd prefer to see you in a sounder growth situation with better management. But right now the market's going through a period of uncertainty and readjustment, and we ought to give some thought to safety. You're in a very strong defensive position in everything except the Warwick, and I have to agree with Mrs. Forsyth——'

'Mrs. Forsyth's not the only person who's ever heard of the stock market,' I said irritably. 'And since she's walked out on me, I don't see where she enters into it. But I'll tell you what; I don't believe in nursing losses any more than you do. Let's get rid of it. Get seven-eighths if you can, and go as low as three-quarters if you have to.'

'Good.' He was pleased. 'I think that's wise. Mrs. Forsyth——'

'Goddammit, never mind Mrs. Forsyth!' I barked. Then I relented. 'Sorry, Chris. What was it you started to say?'

'Oh—— I was going to ask if you wanted to put the proceeds from the Warwick in some sound utility, just for the moment?'

'No,' I said. 'Leave it in cash. As a matter of fact, while I'm over here I'm taking a good look at real estate. This place is booming—— But never mind that. Just unload the Warwick. G'bye.'

I hung up, elated. It was perfect. Neither of them had suspected a thing, and I was already laying the groundwork.

I flipped through the paper to the classified section. Real estate. Here we were. Acreage. There were several

big listings, some ocean front, and some highway frontage. I tore the section out, and looked at my watch. It was a little after one now. I dressed, closed the bags, put on the straw hat, and called the desk.

'Would you get my bill ready, please? And send a boy up to two-two-six for the bags.'

'Yes, sir. Right away.'

I looked at myself in the bathroom mirror. I was tired; dead tired. But the exhaustion merely made me look a little older. Marian had been right all the time. Chapman and I might not look anything alike actually, but within the limits of the average description we were indistinguishable.

Pretty big man. Above average size, anyway. Six feet, like that. 180, 190. Not old, not young. Thirties, I'd say. Brown hair. Dark, light, reddish? Well, uh, brown, you know. Blue eyes. Grey eyes. Green eyes.

Add the moustache, horn-rim glasses, cigarette holder. Add his car, his clothes, his identification. Add the personality traits. Throw in a week or ten days between observation and description. And finally throw in the fact that from beginning to end there was never any reason to doubt that Chapman was Chapman, and what did you have? Chapman.

But only if nobody had ever seen us both. That was vital.

I followed the boy with the luggage down to the desk. They were all different—porter, clerk, cashier. I'd noted them carefully last night while he was checking in.

I scrutinized all the items on the bill, and took out the traveller's cheques. 'Would you cash an extra one for me?' I asked. 'I need some change.'

'Yes, sir. We'd be glad to.'

I signed them, and as they lay on the desk I compared

the signatures with the originals. Good. Very good. I put the change in the wallet, tossed the car keys to the porter, and said. 'Grey Cadillac, Louisiana plates.' I stuck one of the filter cigarettes in the holder, lit it, and followed him. Chapman had come in here, and I had gone out. There was nothing to it.

He stowed the bags and the recorder and briefcase in the boot. I gave him a dollar, and got in. The car was almost new, and was upholstered in pale blue leather. It was unbearably hot, and I hit the buttons to roll the windows down. I rummaged in the glove compartment for a Florida highway map, and found one, and also came up with a pair of clip-on sun-glasses. Fastening them on my frames, I looked at myself in the mirror. It was better all the time. I could *be* Chapman. Then I shuddered. Except that Chapman was lying on the bottom in six hundred feet of water, in the gloom and the everlasting silence, with his chest crushed by pressure. I shook it off.

I took out the classified real-estate ads I'd torn from the *Herald*, and checked some of the listings against the highway map. Several looked promising. One was a block of highway frontage on US 1 between Hollywood and North Miami, listed with the Fitzpatrick Realty Co. of Hollywood at an asking price of three hundred and seventy-five thousand.

I drove up and cruised around the town for about half an hour, looking it over. It appeared to be just about right. There were several motels of the type I was looking for, and it wasn't too far from Miami. It was overflowing with real-estate outfits, of course, and I dropped in at three of them, introduced myself, and explained I was just looking over the local real-estate picture.

It was a little after two-thirty when I looked in on Fitzpatrick. He had a rather small place in a good location

on one of the principal streets. Two salesmen and a girl were at work at desks out front. I bypassed the salesmen, gave the girl one of Chapman's business cards, and said I'd like to talk to Fitzpatrick if he was in. She disappeared into the inner office. I slipped one of the cigarettes into the holder and was lighting it when she came back out and nodded.

He was a heavy-set and balding man in his fifties with the easy manner of a born salesman and a big nose criss-crossed with tiny purple veins. It was a nose that showed years of loving care, and I reflected that his liver probably looked like a hob-nailed boot. We shook hands. I sat down, unclipped the sun-glasses, and dropped them in my pocket. It wouldn't do to have people remembering that I had worn them inside.

He leaned back in his chair, glanced at the card, and asked, 'What line of business are you in, Mr. Chapman?'

'Oh, several,' I said. 'Cotton gin, radio station, newspaper—Actually, I'm down here on vacation, for a little fishing. In the Keys, and maybe over at Bimini for a few days. It's been about three years since I was in the Miami area, and I was just wondering what was happening in real-estate values.'

'I'd tell you,' he said, 'but since you're a businessman yourself you'd call me a liar.'

He then proceeded to tell me. He did a convincing job. In Florida real estate all the women were beautiful and all the men were brave, he believed it himself, and he possessed the lyricism of the Irish. Fortunes were made right under his nose every day. We decried a tax set-up under which it was impossible to make money and keep any of it except in capital gains or oil. He suggested we take a ride around and he'd show me a few of the listings they had.

His car was just up the street in a parking lot. Why didn't we take mine? I asked. It was parked out front.

'Nice cars, these Caddies,' he remarked, as we got in.

I clipped on the glasses. 'I'm not much of a car fan. But, hell, when you can charge them off at least you got something out of the deal. What do you think of highway frontage along US 1 here? Has it priced itself out of the market yet?'

'Turn right,' he said, 'and I'll show you a block of it that'll double in price in the next two years. Let me tell you what motel sites are bringing—per front foot—right now, within two miles of it—'

We drove out and looked at it. I asked a few questions about the taxes, total acreage, highway frontage, and how firm he thought the price was, but remained non-committal. We stopped at a bar on the way back and had a drink. He wanted to know where I'd be staying the next few days, and I gave him the name of the motel in Marathon. Fitzpatrick was interested. He'd been in the business long enough to know when he smelled a sale.

I dropped him at his office, and headed south. On the way through Miami I stopped at a florist and wired two dozen yellow roses to Coral Blaine at her home address. They were her favourite flower.

He sometimes sent all the girls in the office inexpensive gifts when he was away on vacation, and I had an idea now. I could accomplish two things at once. On the way out of town, going south towards the Keys, I began watching for one of those roadside curio places that sold concrete flamingos. I finally located one, and pulled off.

It was the usual tourist-stopper seen along the highways all over south Florida, cluttered with four-foot clamshells from the Great Barrier Reef, cypress knees, alligator skins, coconut monkey heads, boxed fruit, and

postcards. It was run by a cold-eyed man with a Georgia accent and a brow-beaten woman I took to be his wife. I poked disdainfully around in the junk for a while and finally settled on the gift boxes of exotic jellies. GUAVA, SEA GRAPE, TANGERINE MARMALADE—WE PACK AND SHIP.

‘How much off for four?’ I asked.

His bleak eyes shifted from me to the seven thousand dollars’ worth of car out front, and back again. ‘Same price, mister, One or a hundred.’

‘I can see you’re a born merchandiser,’ I said. I opened the briefcase, dug out the list Marian had given me, and wrote down the names and home addresses of the four girls: Bill McEwen at the paper, and Mrs. English, Jean Sessions, and Barbara Cullen at the office.

‘One box to each address,’ I said. I paid him, and added, ‘Give me a receipt. I’ve been stung on these deals before.’

He gave me one. I carefully stowed it in my wallet, and went out. The concrete flamingos were lined up along the fence at the right of the building. ‘What the devil are those things?’ I asked. ‘I’ve been seeing them all along the road.’

‘Ornamental flamingos,’ he replied.

‘What are they made of?’ I asked. ‘And what good are they?’

‘Plaster,’ he said. ‘Concrete. These ones are concrete. You stick ’em up on lawns, or in the shrubbery. The ones with bases you set in paddlin’ pools.’

I shook my head. ‘God, the things you people sell to tourists.’ He watched coldly as I got back in the car and drove off.

CHAPTER NINE

I ARRIVED at Marathon and checked into the motel with almost an hour to spare before I was supposed to call Coral Blaine. I was practically out on my feet. After a shower and a harsh rubdown, I set up the tape recorder, put on the No. 5 roll, which was devoted almost altogether to her, and listened with the volume turned down. I found I didn't need it any more. My mind ran ahead of the tape. There were tens of thousands of things I didn't know about her and about Chapman, but everything on those five hours of tape was stamped into my brain.

I called her at exactly nine, and again it was easy. She'd got the roses; that helped. She was going to somebody's house to play bridge. Two of the names she mentioned were familiar, so I made some appropriate comment. I was excited about tomorrow's fishing, and I was getting burned up with Chris Lundgren. If he didn't stop throwing Marian Forsyth's advice at me I was going to switch my account to Merrill Lynch or somebody. Any time I needed that woman's advice about anything—

She sniffed, and agreed with me. It was just too bad about poor Marian, but she guessed when women reached that age they got sort of—well, you know, frustrated and embittered.

'She's in New York, you know. She called Bill McEwen today—'

'What'd she call her for?' I demanded suspiciously. 'Bill, I mean.'

'She gave her an ad to run in the paper. She's selling her house. Bill said she told her she'd be back here Saturday.'

'Yeah. And I suppose she'll be talking about me behind my back to everybody in town. After I offered her six months' pay, when she blew up and quit.'

'Well, I certainly wouldn't worry about *her* talking about somebody——'

We exchanged the usual I-love-you's and the I-miss-you's, and rang off. It was beautiful, I thought. And I was becoming about as fond of the catty little witch as Marian was.

I called Captain Wilder of the *Blue Water III*, and told him I was in town and would be on the dock at eight a.m. He told me how to get there. I left a call for seven, took off my clothes, and fell into bed. The moment the light was out, I thought of Marian, and was so lonely for her I ached. I didn't even have a photograph. Then twenty-four hours of tension uncoiled inside me like a breaking spring, and I dropped into blackness. . . .

She was running ahead of me along a sidewalk supported by giant cables in catenary curves, with only emptiness and fog beneath us. She was drawing away, and she ran into the fog and I lost her, and there was nothing but the sound of her footsteps dying away. I awoke and was tangled in the sheet and the phone was ringing.

It all came back, and for a moment I was sick with terror. Then it was gone. I'd expected it, of course; at the precise moment of waking you're defenceless. It was nothing, and would wear off in a few days. I picked up the phone. It was seven o'clock.

Captain Wilder was a chubby and jovial man with an unending supply of chatter and dirty stories, and his mate was a Cuban boy with limited English. To both I was merely another faceless possessor of traveller's cheques, to be fished successfully and made happy. I wore the dark glasses, of course, and a long-vizored fishing cap. I used

Chapman's few words of Spanish on the Cuban boy, and talked a little about fishing at Acapulco.

There was no enjoyment in it. I kept thinking of his body lying down there somewhere crushed under the tons of water. We didn't catch anything to speak of, which was good. I wouldn't have to fight off the photographers. I explained we'd have to cut the first day short because I had an important business call to make, and we were back at the dock at three.

That was two p.m., New Orleans time. I called from the motel.

'Chris? Chapman. How are you making out with that Warwick?'

'Oh, hello, Mr. Chapman,' he replied. 'The fishing all right?'

'Lousy,' I said shortly. 'But about that oil stock——?'

'Hmmm. Let's see. We unloaded six thousand shares of it yesterday, at two seven-eighths. It went to three-quarters, and we disposed of two more at that price. It sold off to five-eighths at closing, and has been hanging there and at a half all day. So we still have two thousand.

'Right,' I said briskly. 'Just let it ride until we can get three-quarters.' I made a rough calculation. 'Now, look. My cash position must be around thirty thousand at the moment, or a little better? That right?'

'Ye-es—I think so. I haven't got the exact figures, but it should be in the neighbourhood of thirty-four thousand.'

'Fine. Now here's what I want you to do. I came in from fishing early so I'd catch you in time, since tomorrow's Saturday. Send me a cheque for twenty-five thousand, airmail Special Delivery, care the Clive Hotel, Miami. That's C-l-i-v-e, Clive. Get it off this afternoon, without fail. I've run into something here that's beginning to look terrific, if I can get it at my price, and I think I can.

But I'm going to need some cash to hit 'em with, either for an option or as earnest money when I make the offer.'

'Real estate?' he asked. I could sense disapproval. The securities men and the land dealers shared a deep mutual distrust of each other's 'investments'. Then I realized it ran deeper than that; he didn't have a great deal of faith in my judgment. I'd got where I was in the stock market by riding on Marian Forsyth's back, and now that I'd ditched her there was no telling what would happen. That was fine. What I was doing was right in character. 'Excuse me,' he went on. 'None of my business, of course. I didn't mean to pry.'

'Not at all,' I said. 'As a matter of fact, it is real estate. Highway frontage on US 1. And it's big. If I can get it, I could net a quarter million, after taxes in eighteen months. It's going to take a sizable chunk of cash, but I'll worry about that after I hit 'em with the offer. And you'll shoot that cheque out to me right away, huh?'

'Yes, sir. It'll be in the mail tonight. Airmail Special.'

'Thanks,' I said. 'G'bye.'

I hung up, breathed a quiet sigh, and poured a drink of the Scotch. We were rolling.

Next I called the reservations desk at the Clive and asked for a room Sunday night, and added, 'I'm expecting a very important letter that'll probably get there before I do. Be sure to hang on to it.'

'Yes, sir, Mr. Chapman. We'll hold it.'

I took out some stationery and a pen and practised writing the signature for a solid hour, striving for perfection and at the same time trying to condition myself to signing Harris Chapman so it would be automatic and I couldn't slip and sign Jerry Forbes some time when I was thinking of something else. It occurred to me that in the short time I'd been in Florida I had been three different

people—George Hamilton, Jerry Forbes, and now Chapman, and that in another ten days I'd go back to being Forbes again. A little more of this and I wouldn't really know who I was.

I compared the results of the practice with the originals on the traveller's cheques. To my eye, they were indistinguishable; presumably an expert could tell them apart, but there was no reason the question should ever arise. I tore up the sheets and flushed them down the john.

Around six I showered and shaved, and dressed in one of Chapman's suits. The trousers were about two inches too large in the waist, but it didn't show with the jacket buttoned. Wearing his clothes made me feel queasy, but it had to be done. I found a surprisingly good restaurant and had dinner, after two Martinis at the bar, but it was necessary, for strategic purposes, to ruin the steak beyond the semblance of flavour. Chapman always ate them incinerated, so I ordered it well-done. When the waiter brought it out, I cut into it just once, beckoned peremptorily, and told him to take it back and tell the chef to cook it.

He returned with it a few minutes later. I cut into it, scrutinized it carefully, and gave him a glacial stare.

'I'm sorry,' I said, 'but this steak is still raw. Maybe if I wrote the chef a note——'

The place was crowded, and people at nearby tables were turning to stare. I stared back at them, completely unperturbed. The waiter would have liked nothing better than to poison me, but he removed it once more. This time I ate it when he brought it back. It was like charcoal.

I paid with one of the traveller's cheques. The cashier glanced at the signature, and as she counted out my change she said, 'I'm sorry about the difficulty with your steak Mr. Chapman. We'll do better next time.'

It had been quite successful.

I called Coral Blaine around eight, and it went off beautifully. I was discovering again how right Marian had been. She'd said I wouldn't have much trouble with her. She was such a featherbrained chatterer she'd probably never pay any great attention to anything I said. I got her started on some of her upcoming 'parties' and let her rattle. It was only towards the end that I mentioned the real-estate deal and said I'd probably be going back to Miami in another day or so.

The next day I raised and landed a sail, but told Wilder to release it. It was Saturday, of course, so I didn't have to talk to Chris. I called Coral. It was becoming routine by now. When there was a pause in the flow of her gossip, I asked, 'How would you like to live in Florida, angel?'

'Heavens, darling, what are you talking about?'

'Just an idea,' I said. 'We might move down here some day. Not for a few years, of course, but it's worth thinking about. This is a big-time country, and there's real money to be made here. I'm feeling out a deal right now that could put a quarter of a million in our pocket. That's a lot of mink stoles, angel.'

'Gracious, Harris, anybody would think I was marrying you for mink. But about moving to Florida—I'd have to think about that. With all the dear friends we have here.'

Well, she had one more dear friend there than she'd had yesterday. Marian Forsyth would have arrived in Thomaston this morning.

I'd hardly hung up when the phone rang. It was Fitzpatrick at last. 'Well, Mr. Chapman, how's the fishing been?'

'Not too bad,' I said. 'I released a six-foot sail today.'

'Fine, I'm glad to hear it. But you want to come down

in January some time and hit 'em off Palm Beach when they're schooled up. Magnificent fishing.'

I smiled. Fitzpatrick was one of the good ones. He'd probably never fished in his life, but he'd talked to a fisherman before he'd called me.

'But I'll get right to what I called you for,' he went on easily. 'The owner of that piece of highway frontage dropped by today and we talked about it a little. Now he didn't say so in so many words, but I've just got a hunch he might be open to an offer.'

'Hmmm,' I said thoughtfully. 'It'd take a lot of cash to swing a deal like that— What kind of financing did you say it had on it now?'

'One of the Miami banks has a first mortgage for a hundred and fifty thousand. But I could almost guarantee that if you wanted to refinance, you could get two.'

'And he's asking three seventy-five?'

'That's right. But as I say, you can always try with an offer.'

'I'll tell you what,' I said. 'I'm coming back to Miami tomorrow for a few days, and I'll keep it in mind.'

'Good. Ah, where'll you be staying, Mr. Chapman?'

'Clive Hotel,' I said.

We fished with indifferent success until shortly after noon the next day, and came in. I checked out of the motel around two-thirty and drove to Miami. The Clive was a large hotel on Biscayne Boulevard and very convenient to everything downtown. The doorman called the garage to send a man after the car. I followed the boy in to the desk, and when I asked for my reservation the airmail Special from Webster & Adcock was waiting for me. I slit it open and looked at the cheque for twenty-

five thousand dollars. This was just the first trickle, to break the dike.

After I'd registered, I stepped over to the cashier's window and cashed three more of the traveller's cheques. There was no use letting them go to waste, and I was going to need plenty of cash before I was through. We went up to the room. It was one of the expensive ones, looking out over the waterfront park and the bay. As soon as the boy was gone, I put through the call to Coral Blaine. I was always jittery while that was hanging over my head. And it was time, too, to give her the first little nudge.

'I'm back in Miami, angel,' I said. 'At the Clive Hotel, if you have to reach me for anything the next few days.'

She was in a kittenish mood tonight. 'I just hope you're behavin' yourself.'

'I am,' I said. 'As a matter of fact, I'm working. That real-estate deal with Fitzpatrick.'

'Darling, you're supposed to be on vacation.'

'I'm never on vacation when there's money to be made. You know that, honey. Oh, say, I saw Marian Forsyth on the street this afternoon. Did you know she was in Miami?'

'You *couldn't* have. Dear, she's right here in Thomaston. Don't you remember, I told you—'

'Sure. I know you said she'd told Bill she was coming back Saturday. But I could have sworn this was her. She went past in a car.'

She became considerably cooler. 'Maybe you just miss her, Harris. Or you're thinking about her.'

'Cut it out, Coral. You know better than that. The only thing I'm thinking about her is that I don't trust her. But you're sure she's there?'

'Of course, dear. I saw her myself, just this morning.'

'Well, you watch out for her. She's probably spreading lies behind my back. By God, what does she want, didn't I offer her half a year's pay?'

'Darling,' she said wearily, 'you've been more than fair with her. But do we *have* to talk about Mrs. Forsyth?'

'Of course not, honey. And I'm sorry. It was just somebody that looked like her. Let's talk about the future Mrs. Chapman.'

When we'd hung up, I got Fitzpatrick's card out of the wallet and called him at his home. I caught him in. 'Chapman,' I said. 'You remember——?'

'Oh, yes, Mr. Chapman. How are you?'

'Just fine. I was hoping you could help me out with something. I want to open an account in a local bank, and wondered if you could recommend one. I thought you might have connections——'

'I sure have. The Seaboard First National. Go in and see John Dakin. He's the Assistant Cashier, and a good friend of mine. I'll call him as soon as they open in the morning.'

'Thanks a million.'

'You given any more thought to that piece of frontage we were looking at?'

'Well, yes,' I said. 'As a matter of fact, I drove up that way this afternoon, when I came up from the Keys.'

'You're at the Clive now?'

'That's right.'

'I'd be glad to drive down and talk it over with you a little more. Unless you're busy, that is.'

'No,' I said. 'I'm not doing anything this evening. I might be in the dining room, but I'll leave word at the desk.'

'Fine,' he replied. 'I'll see you in about forty-five minutes.'

The dining room was just dim enough. He was one of the people they'd be certain to question afterwards, or at any rate one of the shrewdest. I couldn't take too many chances with him. The other time I'd been wearing the dark glasses except for the few minutes in his office when I first met him, he wouldn't get much of a look at me here, and this was the last time I'd see him. I took a table for two along the wall, and was just finishing the soup when he came in. I stood up and we shook hands. 'I forgot to ask if you'd had dinner.'

'Yes, thanks, I've had mine.'

'Well, have a drink, anyway.' I beckoned the waiter over. He ordered a bourbon and water. When the waiter returned with it, I said, 'Would you take this knife away and bring me a new one? It looks dirty.'

'Yes, sir.'

We talked real estate in general for a few minutes. The waiter brought my entrée. I'd ordered roast beef. There was gravy on it.

'No, no,' I said. 'I don't want that gravy on it, waiter. Would you change that, please?'

'Yes, sir, of course.'

He departed. 'I don't know why they ruin meat that way,' I said to Fitzpatrick. 'All that damned grease to give you indigestion.'

'Yes,' he replied easily. 'I know exactly what you mean.'

We'd just resumed our conversation when the waiter came back with the new order of roast beef. I looked at it, and then at him, and shook my head. 'We don't seem to get together at all. I don't like to create an international incident, but I'm positive I said all outside slices, well-done.'

'Yes, sir.' He was silently raging now, but he took it away again.

I addressed Fitzpatrick. 'Sorry to create a fuss, but by God, the prices you pay, the least you can do is get what you order.'

He smiled. 'Not at all. If more people had that attitude, service would be a lot better than it is.' Fitzpatrick was a smooth article.

I ate some of the dinner, ordered coffee for myself and another bourbon for Fitzpatrick. While we were waiting for it to come, I took one of Chapman's pill-bottles from my pocket, shook out a pill, and swallowed it with some water. I had no idea what it was, but it probably wouldn't hurt me. Then I stuck a cigarette in the holder, and lit it with the butane lighter. Fitzpatrick, I thought, should be able to give them a pretty good description of Chapman.

The drinks came. 'All right, let's get right to the point,' I said. 'I want to make an offer on that piece of frontage, but there's no use wasting your time and mine. Three hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars. What do you think?'

He lit a cigarette. 'Ethically, of course, I couldn't say, even if I knew. We represent the seller, and the only price we know anything about is the one he tells us. But let's put it this way; I've been in the business a long time and I never saw anybody get hurt making an offer.'

'Okay,' I said. 'Here's the deal. I'm on vacation, of course, and all I have with me is traveller's cheques. I can't give you a cheque on my bank at home, but I called my broker in New Orleans on Friday and told him to send me some money. It just came.' I took out the Webster & Adcock envelope and dropped it on the table. 'As soon as I open that account in the morning, I'll give you a cheque for five thousand dollars to submit with the offer. Could

you have one of your men pick it up here at the hotel?’

‘Of course. We’d be glad to.’

‘Good. Tell the owner if he’s really interested in a deal he’d better let me know tomorrow, because if he does accept I’ve got to raise the balance of a hundred and seventy thousand dollars’ cash to complete the transaction, and nobody’s got that lying around in a banking account. I don’t want to call off my vacation to go home and raise it, but it happens I can swing it by liquidating securities in my account with Webster & Adcock, and I can do that by telephone. It’ll take a few days for my deposits to clear New Orleans, of course, before the bank here will honour any cheques on the account, but it’ll still be the simplest way to handle it.’

He nodded. ‘That would be fine all round.’

I stood up. ‘Okay, then. You can have somebody pick up my cheque here at the desk around ten-thirty in the morning. And call me right away when you hear from the owner.’

I went back up to the room. All this jockeying around with offers was a nuisance, and it was going to cost us five thousand dollars, but for purposes of verisimilitude it was absolutely essential. I mentally went over our timetable. We were right on schedule, and doing beautifully. It was time now to start lining up the girl.

I went out and took a cab, and told the driver I was alone in town and wanted to see some of the night life. He had nothing better to offer than a cheap night club. I had a drink, and departed in another cab. The driver of this one had a more sophisticated outlook, or fewer scruples. He looked over my identification. I voiced some preferences. He drove me back to the hotel, and I gave him my room number.

It was around ten-thirty when she knocked on the door.

CHAPTER TEN

SHE wouldn't do at all; I could see that within the first ten minutes. She was dark and rather pretty, particularly with her clothes off, but she was a good-natured, somewhat unimaginative girl with no particular tensions or any animosity toward anything or anybody. I didn't like flying in the face of psychiatric dogma by saying there was such a thing as a well-adjusted prostitute, but that was exactly what she was. She was lazy, the hours were good, and she earned considerably more than the average nuclear physicist. And she'd lived around Miami for years, and was crazy about it. She was out.

I completed the transaction with her, more as a gesture of conformity than from any particular interest in her, gave her the fifty dollars she asked for, added ten more for no reason that I could think of, and she left. I'd have to try again tomorrow.

I awoke around seven, went through that first terrible instant of remembering that left me sick and shaking, and then tried to appraise it clinically to see if it was any better or worse than on preceding mornings. It appeared to be about the same. Well, it would go away in time.

I had coffee and orange juice sent up, and put in an hour's practice on the signature. From now on, it was dangerous. The traveller's cheques didn't mean anything; nobody ever bothered to look at the signatures unless they'd been reported stolen. But now it was banks, who were notoriously touchy on the subject. Then I reminded myself for the hundredth time that I was being silly. I was overlooking the point of the whole thing, the real beauty of it.

The only thing I was going to forge, aside from a receipt which would be filed without even a glance, was the *endorsement* of a cheque. And who ever looked at that unless there was some question it was the payee who had cashed it? It was just as she had pointed out to me the first time. As far as anybody in the world knew—except the two of us—I was Harris Chapman. I acknowledged receipt of the cheque, told the man who'd sent it to me that I'd cashed it, and that was the end of the line. And as for getting the money out of the bank—that was the real honey of the deal; I wouldn't be trying to copy a signature, because it would be *my own*. Not my name, of course, and it would be only my version of Harris Chapman's signature, but it would be what was on the signature card, because I'd opened the account. No, if we ended in disaster, it wouldn't be this forgery thing that tripped us.

It went off without a hitch. I arrived at the bank shortly after it opened, and inquired for Dakin. He was at one of the desks behind a railing at one end of the main lobby, a nervous, self-consciously hearty, and overworked man who couldn't have described me ten minutes later if I'd been wearing a monocle and a sharpened bone through my nose.

'Oh, yes. Yes. Mr.——' His eyes swept toward the memo pad to verify his old friend's name. 'Mr. Fitzpatrick called. Glad to have you as a depositor, Mr. Chapman. And we know you'll like Miami.'

I filled in the form, signed two copies of the signature card, endorsed the cheque, and gave it to him. He carried it off to one of the tellers' windows and returned with my deposit receipt and a cheque-book. He assured me it wouldn't take over three or four days for it to clear New Orleans. I went back to the hotel, wrote out a cheque for

five thousand dollars, borrowed an envelope from the cashier, and left it at the desk to be delivered to anybody from Fitzpatrick Realty.

Up in the room again, I got out the list of securities, opened the *Herald* to yesterday's closing stock prices, and made a rough outline of what to sell. It would just about clean out the account; there'd be less than twelve thousand dollars left in it. I put through the call to New Orleans. 'Hello, Chris? Chapman——'

'Oh, good morning, Mr. Chapman. I see Warwick opened at two and a half again this morning, so we may not——'

'Never mind that,' I cut in brusquely. 'It's chicken feed. I'm on my way now on that deal I told you about—oh, incidentally, the twenty-five thousand dollars was here when I checked in at the Clive last night. Thanks a million. I opened an account and deposited it this morning. The deal's going through at my price, beyond any shadow of doubt, and I'm going to need a hundred and fifty thousand dollars within the next few days. You got my list handy, and a pencil?'

'Yes, sir. But you're not going to——?'

I paid no attention. 'Sell the Columbia Gas, the PG & E, that Du Pont Preferential, Champion Paper Preferential, and the AT & T—— That should be pretty close to a hundred thousand. Now, let's see——'

'But, Mr. Chapman, those are all good, sound issues. I hate to see you sell them.'

'What?' I asked absently. Then I did a take, and barked into the phone. 'Goddammit, Chris, I'm not interested in being on the defensive. There's no way to stand still in this economy; you keep going ahead, or you're eaten alive by ducks. Let's face it. The bull market's dead, and I'm not interested in making four cents in dividends and

giving three of them to the Government. I want to make money, and right now Florida real estate's the place to make it; not in the stock market. When the market starts to move again, I'll get back in, but for now I'm going to put that money to work.'

'Yes, sir,' he said. He didn't like it, but there was nothing he could do about it. We went on with the list.

'All right,' I concluded. 'The largest block in there is a thousand shares. You can unload it all in an hour without even a ripple. Get the cheque off to me as early as you can this afternoon, registered airmail, care of the Clive Hotel, so I'll have it by the time the banks open in the morning. It's going to take several days to clear. Got it?'

'Yes. I have it all.'

'Fine,' I said. 'G'bye.' I hung up, and breathed softly with relief.

That much of it was past now; the Chris phase was complete, and he'd never suspected a thing. It called for a drink, in spite of the hour. I was just pouring it when the phone rang. It was Fitzpatrick.

He was in high spirits. 'Well, Mr. Chapman, it looks as if you've got yourself a deal. I talked to the owner a few minutes ago, and I think he's about ready to accept.'

'Fine,' I said. 'I'm raising the money now.'

A woman's voice cut in on the line. 'Mr. Chapman, I'm sorry to interrupt. This is the hotel switchboard——'

'Yes?' I asked.

'We have a very urgent long-distance call from Thomaston, Louisiana.'

'Oh.' I didn't like the sound of that at all. 'I mean—— put it on.'

'Harris! Thank God they located you.' It was Coral Blaine. 'I've been trying for over an hour, but I'd for-

gotten what hotel you said. This whole place is in an uproar——'

'What is it?' I broke in.

'We've got to have the combination of that old safe, and you're the only one who knows it. Barbara says you've got it written down somewhere in your office, but we can't find it.'

I could feel the whole thing caving away beneath us, but I had to try. 'Get hold of yourself!' I snapped. 'What old safe are you talking about? And what's happened?'

'Harris! The one that was moved out of here about six months ago when you bought the new one. It was stored in the warehouse, remember? And just before you left you told Mr. Elkins to sell it to the junk yard——'

Someone knocked on the door.

' . . . Well, yesterday afternoon he and some more men moved it outside on to the loading platform, but the junk man forgot to pick it up. It was unlocked. And this morning about eight-thirty, some first-graders on the way to school——'

I could feel myself growing sick. 'Oh, Jesus, not that!'

'No,' she interrupted. 'Not one of the children. A dog. Judy Weaver's miniature poodle——'

My knees bent, and I sat down. 'Well, don't tell me the whole goddamned town——'

There was another knock on the door.

'Harris! Will you *please* stop swearing! That silly girl is practically out of her mind. They've got her under a sedative now, but when she wakes up she'll start all over again. The Humane Society is driving me crazy. Mrs. Weaver says they're going to sue you. Everybody in town is simply *furious*, and people have been calling up here until I'm ready to scream. Some machine shop has drilled a hole in the safe so the stupid dog can breathe, but

they can't get him out. The radio news got hold of it, and now the New Orleans papers are calling up. Barbara says you've got the combination——'

Maybe it would help, I thought bitterly, if she told me that again. Whoever it was in the corridor was banging on the door again. I had to get away from that voice and try to think.

'Hold it,' I said. 'Somebody's at the door.'

I put down the phone and answered it. It was a porter. 'Telegram, sir,' he said. I handed him a coin of some kind, and took it.

I closed the door and leaned against it. We'd had it. It wasn't on the tapes; I knew that. I'd been through everything in the wallet. The little address book! I grabbed it out of my pocket and flipped madly through it. Nothing but addresses.

I looked at the phone lying on the desk. This was the way it ended. You learned everything there was to learn, you took care of every contingency, you memorized, you rehearsed, you perfected—and then some kid locked a dog in a safe a thousand miles away and you were done.

I still had the telegram in my hand. Through the little glassine window I could see some figures, and *Brindon, La.* I'd never heard of it.

Louisiana!

I slashed it open and stared at the text.

RIGHT THIRTYTWO LEFT TWO SLANT NINETEEN RIGHT
THREE SLANT SIX REPEAT RIGHT THIRTYTWO . . . TAPED
BENEATH PENCIL DRAWER.

I sighed, and pushed myself off the door on watery knees. Picking up the phone and holding it a little way from my face, I said, 'Sit down, and I'll be right with you, as soon as I deal with this crisis.'

I spoke into it. 'Coral? You there? That combination is

taped to the bottom of the pencil drawer in my desk. But, hold on, I'll give it to you. Write it down——' I repeated it off the telegram.

'Thank Heavens——'

I interrupted crisply. 'One of you go see Mrs. Weaver right away and see if you can smooth this over. Mrs. English, maybe; she's good with people. Buy Judy the biggest stuffed toy you can find, one of those thirty-five dollar jobs. And, Coral, I hate to be crabby, honey, but I'm working on a real big deal down here——'

'Darling, I am sorry about it.'

When I'd hung up I went over and lay down on the bed. I could have used a drink, but I doubted I could pour it.

She'd heard about the uproar and driven to some nearby town to send the telegram, probably from a pay phone. I closed my eyes, and I could see her so vividly it hurt. When they made her, I thought, they made only one.

It wasn't only that she'd saved us this time; she'd put the thing on ice once and for all. I could make mistakes by the dozen from now on and it wouldn't matter in the slightest. Only Chapman could have known that combination.

Her name sounded like something dreamed up by a cheap press-agent. Justine Laray. Not that it mattered. What did matter was that I was sure I'd found what I was looking for.

She knocked on the door around eleven p.m., and when I opened it and she came in, she sized me up, appraised the luggage and the fat wallet lying on the dresser—all in one glance and without even appearing to—and gave me a bright smile that promised unimaginable ecstasies and

almost concealed the contempt she felt for any jerk who couldn't get a woman without buying one.

It would be a hundred dollars, honey. And when I fatuously agreed to this overcharge it merely increased her contempt. I was sweet, and much better-looking than a lot of those fat expense-account creeps—ugh! Not that she'd ever done much of this, of course. She was really in show business. A song stylist.

'That right?' I said heartily. I slapped her on the behind. 'We're going to get along fine, sweetie. I always like people with talent. Never had any myself, except for making money. And women.'

It might have been a little cruder than usual, but she'd heard the tune. 'You don't mind if I get it now, do you?'

'Hell, no,' I waved a hand toward the wallet. 'Take it out of there. Why not take two while you're at it, and stay all night? Christ, if you don't get it the Government will, and they don't even kiss me. I'll mix us a little drink, huh?'

I'd been cashing the traveller's cheques at a steady rate, and the wallet held close to three thousand dollars now. The rest of the cheques were lying beside it.

'You know, I just might do that,' she said archly. She took four fifties from the wallet.

She was around twenty-five, a rather slender girl with nice teeth, short dark hair, and eyes that were almost black. There was nothing of the Latin about her, however. Her skin was dead white, and the eyes were cold. I put ice and Scotch in two glasses and set them on the dresser.

'Come on, sweetie, get out of those hot, sticky clothes and into a cold highball. You still got to meet the Credentials Committee.'

We went to bed. I'd had more fun in dentists' offices. She probably had, too; but at least she was being paid to endure it. If she drank enough, she might talk about herself.

'You'd never think I was thirty-nine years old, would you?' I said. 'Come on, you'd have said thirty-two, wouldn't you? Hit me in the stomach. Hell, go on; hit me. . . .

I went to Notre Dame. No, I didn't play football. I didn't have to; my old man had plenty of money. But don't think I was one of those pantywaists that had it all given to me. I made it myself. Radio stations, newspapers, real estate. I was going to be around here at least a week, on a real-estate deal. Stick with me, if you can stand the pace, and we'll have a ball. Feel the muscles in that stomach, Marian. Like the old washboard, huh?

She drank; she had to, to stand me. She began to get a little tight.

Miami, hah! And Miami Beach. Brother, you could have 'em. What a girl had to put up with from those fat expense-account types that think they're better'n she is, the hairy pigs—— Vegas was for her. Or L.A. She could go to work tomorrow. Did I know she was a song stylist? Brother, the crummy breaks she'd had in this crummy place. That agent of hers—— Hah! this was an agent? He couldn't book Crosby. And that room-mate running off with three of her best dresses. Imagine, stealing from another working girl. . . .

Hey, where you get this Marian routine? My name's Justine. I already tolja that three times already. Sure, you called me Marian. Three times, for Crissakes. Whatta you carryin' a torch, or something? Look, don't call me Marian, or Sweetie, or Hey You. I got a name, just like anybody else. And you use it, buster. You think I'm some

cheap tramp that you just grunt or point or something and hand me ten bucks and I fall over. . . .

In the morning she gave me her telephone number so we could eliminate the middleman. I gave her an extra fifty.

'You call me, honey,' she said, putting on lipstick and giving me an arch glance. I was a crude, repulsive, ego-centric blow-hard who couldn't even remember her name, and she detested me, but oddly enough I seemed to have nearly as much money as I boasted I had, and I threw it around.

The registered airmail from Webster & Adcock arrived at nine-thirty. I slit it open, and looked at the cheque for a hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Five minutes after the bank opened, I endorsed it, wrote out a deposit slip, and added it to the account.

Back at the hotel, I called Fitzpatrick. He'd already notified me, shortly after noon yesterday, that the owner had accepted the offer.

'Fitzpatrick,' I said now. 'I just received the money from my broker, and deposited it. I'll be able to give you a cheque for a hundred and seventy thousand dollars by Friday. Or Monday, at the latest.'

'That's fine, Mr. Chapman. Just fine.'

'In the meantime I'm going to take a good look at the whole South Florida real-estate picture, and may get into it a little deeper. Keep me in mind.'

'Yes, sir. As a matter of fact, we have a number of other real good listings I'd like to show you—'

'Thanks. But I think I'll run over to the Naples area for a day or so. I'll keep in touch. G'bye.'

I called Chris and told him the cheque had arrived and that I'd deposited it. He was cool, but polite. I was still a

client, if a rather shrunken one. The public stenographer in the hotel addressed an envelope for me and I signed the receipts and mailed them back to him. Next I called Captain Wilder in Marathon. He was out in the Stream, but I left a message with his wife that I'd got tied up on a business deal and would have to cancel the other three days' fishing.

Coral Blaine was next. She started to tell me of some trouble at the radio station. There'd been an FCC violation of some kind. I cut her off. I was in the saddle now.

'Tell Wingard to take care of it,' I said shortly. 'Authorize him to order anything he needs. I'm up to my ears in this real-estate deal. In fact, I've cancelled the rest of my fishing reservations, and I'm going to spend the balance of the trip looking over the situation down here.'

'Darling, I wish you wouldn't work so hard.'

'I like to work. So aside from the FCC, everything's serene there? No more dogs locked in safes?'

She laughed sheepishly. 'I am sorry about that. Wasn't it the silliest thing?'

'It could have been serious as hell. And I'm not so sure it was an accident, either.' The dog thing had been a break we hadn't counted on, but it was too good to waste.

'Harris, what do you mean? Of course it was an accident.'

'Maybe. But, look—— Suppose somebody was trying to cut my throat? Give me a bad name, and make me lose advertisers? A thing like that could ruin me—people going around saying Chapman's a sonofabitch that'd leave an unlocked safe around where kids can play in it. Suppose she'd actually—I mean, suppose it *had* been one of the kids? Instead of just a dog——'

'Harris, what on earth are you talking about?'

'Oh, I guess it's silly,' I said, abruptly changing tone.

'Well, angel, I'm off to Naples to look over some property. I'll call you later.'

I arrived in Naples early in the afternoon, and checked in at a motel. After driving round a while I called a few real-estate people on the phone, introduced myself, and made some inquiries. I plugged in the tape recorder, and began erasing the tapes, running them through the machine on 'Record' with the volume turned all the way down. It was a slow process, as each took nearly an hour. I finished three of them. Once, I put one of them on 'Play Back' for a few minutes just to hear her voice. I sat on the floor with my eyes closed, and I could almost imagine she was there in the room.

Around ten that night I was sitting at the bar in a very dimly lighted cocktail lounge. Among the eight or ten customers at the tables behind me was a dark-haired girl in her late twenties. She was sitting at a table for two, with a man about my size. I watched them from time to time in the mirror. After a while her escort excused himself and went to the men's room. I stuck a cigarette in the holder, lit it, and got off the stool as if to go out. Then I saw her, and stopped. I walked over to her table.

'Look, Marian,' I said angrily, 'what are you doing here? I know you're up to something. Why don't you leave me alone?'

She was too amazed even to speak. People nearby turned and stared.

'Spreading lies behind my back!' I went on, beginning to shout. 'Well, you're wasting your time, Marian. Everybody knows how fair I was. I was more than fair——'

She had recovered now. 'What's the matter with you?' she asked coldly. 'I never saw you before in my life.'

The bartender was on his way; and so was her escort, just emerging from the john. I straightened, and looked blankly around, and then at her. 'Oh,' I said in confusion. 'I—uh—I'm sorry. I thought you were somebody else.'

Her escort wanted to swing on me, but the bartender broke it up. He put his hand on my shoulder in friendly fashion and we walked to the door. 'Easy does it, Jack.' Just as the door was closing, I heard him say to someone at the end of the bar. 'Mother, dear. You never know. I'd have sworn he was cold sober.'

The next day I drove up to Fort Myers. I spent several hours driving round and talking real estate, mostly over the telephone, and finished erasing the tapes so I could dispose of them. Even if they were ever found, they'd be harmless.

I called Coral Blaine. I told her how much I missed her, and that I'd probably be home a little ahead of schedule. 'The minute I clean up that real-estate deal on Monday, I'm going to start back.'

'That's wonderful, darling.'

'I wonder if I ought to hire detectives to watch her?' I said.

'Watch who?' she asked, puzzled.

'Marian Forsyth!' I said angrily. 'Good God, Coral, she can't fool you that easily, can she? Don't you know she's up to something? She's dreamed up some kind of grudge she thinks she has against me, and there's no telling what she'll do. You keep all my papers locked in the safe every minute. And especially my income-tax records——'

'Dear,' she broke in wearily, 'I wish we could stop talking about Marian Forsyth. I'm sick of her. I don't trust her any more than you do, but I don't see what she could do to you.'

'All right, angel,' I said. 'Maybe you're right. I hope so.'

Late that night I threw the blank tapes and the recorder into the Caloosahatchee River. Thursday afternoon I was back in Miami, at the Clive. I called Justine Laray. She was glad to hear from me; she thought she'd lost me.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CHUMPS of my calibre didn't come along every day, and she was beginning to get bigger ideas. She didn't ask for the money in advance this time, and she did a better job of hiding her contempt and being professionally gay in the face of my crudities and oafish bragging about money, sexual prowess, and stomach muscles.

It now appeared that this crummy room-mate had stolen *all* her clothes.

'I could go back to work in night clubs tomorrow if I had the wardrobe,' she said, lying naked in bed with the highball glass and a cigarette. 'But, God, you got no idea, honey, what those gowns cost——'

'Where's the strain?' I asked. 'Hell, at a hundred bucks a jump——'

She was very brave about it. She never told anybody, as a rule, but I was so understanding and, well, sort of nice—— There was her little boy, see. Oh, yes, she'd been married. And this lousy bas—— Her husband had died, that is, after a long and expensive illness. . . .

The Carthaginian B-girls had probably used more or less the same version during the Punic Wars. 'Gee, that's rough,' I said. 'And he doesn't even know? I mean, all the money you send him at that school, he thinks you're a big-shot singer? Well, how about that?'

'So if I can just get back on my feet——'

'You just stick with me, Marian,' I said expansively. 'Maybe we'll do something about this gown business. Maybe tomorrow, huh, if I can get free for a few minutes from this deal. Say, did I tell you I stood to clean up about

eighty thousand? Not bad for a little over a week, huh, baby?’

In the morning I gave her three hundred dollars, slapped her on the rear, and winked. ‘We got to stab Uncle for a little business expense some way, don’t we, kid?’

Sure, I still had her phone number. And if I got a chance I’d pick her up and we’d go shopping.

As soon as she left, I checked out of the hotel, had the car brought around and the bags loaded, and drove over to Miami Beach. I left it in a parking lot six or eight blocks away, and walked to the apartment. It was hot and intensely still with the air-conditioner turned off. The minute I opened the front door and stepped into the room where we’d spent so many hours she was all around me, as if the slender elegance, and colour, and grace of movement were physical things that could reverberate in an empty room like sound waves and keep on echoing long after the person who had set them in motion was gone.

I tried not to look at the water-stained spot on the rug.

I changed into flannels and a sports shirt, left off the glasses and the hat, put my own wallet in my pocket, walked back to Collins Avenue, and took a cab to Miami. At another car-hiring agency I hired a pick-up truck, using my own name and driver’s licence, and took off for the Keys. On the way out of town I watched closely for that roadside curio place where I’d stopped before so I’d have its exact location fixed in my mind.

I had a large-scale map, and a pretty good idea of where I’d find the type of place I was looking for, but it was a long way down the small Keys and interminable bridges of the Overseas Highway. On Sugarloaf Key, some

hundred and thirty miles from Miami, there was a back-country road that took off through the mangroves and salt ponds and ran along an outer line of small keys parallel with the highway. It was a wild area with practically no houses and plenty of places a car could be hidden.

Shortly after two p.m. I found just the spot I wanted, and checked the mileage back to the nearest bus stop on the highway. I started back. Just before three, I stopped at a roadside place on Big Pine Key and called the bank. Marian had said that on an amount that large they'd rush collection, but I had to be absolutely sure. I got hold of Dakin. He asked me to hold on, and checked.

'Yes, sir. Both your deposits have been collected. The second one came through this morning.'

'Thank you very much,' I said.

All I had to do was write a cheque Monday morning for a hundred and seventy thousand dollars. We were ready for the last act.

It was after dark when I got back to Miami Beach. I put the pick-up truck in the garage at the apartment, changed back into Chapman's suit and the glasses and hat, and went over and picked up the Cadillac. I drove to Hollywood and checked in at the Antilles Motel. It was one of those I'd spotted before, an older type built when land was cheaper, with carport spaces between the units. It sat back off the street on US 1 not too far from the centre of town.

The woman in the office was a spry and chatty type of about fifty. I signed the registry card, and told her I'd be there three or four days at least. I was working on a real-estate deal, with Fitzpatrick. Oh, yes, she knew the firm. They were quite nice. I paid her for three days, and said

I'd like to have a unit as far back as possible, away from the highway noise. She took me back to the next to the last unit in the right-hand row. It would do nicely, I said. In addition to the front door, there was a side door opening into the car park. The bath was a combination tub-and-shower arrangement, with a curtain rod and plastic curtain. There was a telephone. I asked her what time she closed the switchboard in the office.

'Eleven p.m.,' she said.

The next morning I stopped at the office on the way out. She was talking to the coloured maid. When the maid left, I asked quietly, after a glance behind me at the door, 'Is there a woman registered here who has real blue-black hair, worn in a chignon? A slender woman, in her thirties?'

'Why, no,' she said, puzzled. 'Why?'

'I just wanted to be sure,' I said. 'If she checks in, don't tell her I asked, but let me know right away.'

'Yes, of course,' she said uncertainly. 'Could you give me her name?'

'Oh, she won't be using her right name,' I said. 'She's too clever for that.'

I had some breakfast in town, and drove up to Palm Beach, mostly killing time. In a hardware store, I bought a two-foot steel wrecking bar. I put it in the boot, and came back to Fort Lauderdale. I cashed several of the cheques in a bank, and one in a bar. I sat in the bar for four hours, nursing three drinks, staring straight ahead at nothing and speaking to no one.

At last the bartender became concerned. 'Are you all right, mister?' he asked.

I turned my head slightly and stared at him. 'What do you mean, am I all right?'

'I—I mean, I thought maybe you didn't feel well, you're so quiet.'

'Well, I'm all right,' I said. 'And don't you forget it.' 'I'm sorry I bothered you——'

'Maybe I have to have a basal metabolism and a blood count before I can drink in your goddamned bar, is that it? Or you want me to take a Rorschach?'

'Okay, okay, forget it.'

I went on muttering after he retreated, and got up and walked out.

Around eight p.m. I registered in a motel on the outskirts of town, lay on the bed with my clothes on until nearly ten, and then grabbed up the phone and called the office. 'Will you, for Christ's sake, stop that stupid phonograph?'

The manager was puzzled. 'What phonograph? Where is it?'

'I don't know,' I said angrily. 'Somewhere back here. If only they'd stop playing that same goddamned record over and over and over—— Never mind! I'll go somewhere else.'

He was standing in the driveway shaking his head as I shot past him in the Cadillac.

I drove down to Miami and called Coral Blaine from a call-box at two a.m. She was somewhat piqued—she'd been worried, and I'd got her out of bed.

'You haven't called since Thursday night, and when I tried to reach you at the Clive Hotel they said you'd left.'

'I've been moving around,' I said.

'There've been several things at the office. The bank wants to know if you'd like to extend the loan on that Washburn property. And the tax people have questioned the depreciation figures on that new gin machinery.'

'Okay. Call Wellman and tell him we'll renew the loan for another year at the same rate of interest. If he tries to

raise us, we'll pay it off now. I'll take up the tax thing when I get back. But never mind all that. Do you still see Marian Forsyth around there?

'Somewhere, practically every day. But, dear, do we have to start on *her* again?'

'Tell me something. Do you ever speak to her?'

'No. She never speaks to me. Why should I?'

'Clever,' I said, as if talking to myself. 'Damned clever.'

'What did you say, darling?'

'Oh,' I said. 'Nothing. But, look, angel, I'll be able to wind up this real-estate deal Monday morning, and probably be home sometime Tuesday.'

I drove back to the motel in Hollywood and went to bed.

The next morning I drove down to Miami Beach, parked the Cadillac in the business area not too far from Dover Way, left the hat and glasses in it, and walked to the apartment. I changed to khaki fishing clothes and a cap, backed the pick-up out of the garage, and drove down to the Keys. It was one-thirty p.m. when I reached the turn-off on to the back road on Sugarloaf. Since it was Sunday, fishermen were rather numerous, pulling boats behind their cars or casting from the bridges. Three miles from the highway there was a dim trace of a road leading off to the left through heavy scrub where the water's edge was a tangle of mangroves. The mangroves thinned out after about a mile, giving way to open areas where boats could be launched. Several cars with empty boat trailers were parked in the vicinity, but there were no people around at the moment. The nearest boat I could see was about a half-mile offshore. I parked the truck off to one side, locked it, and started walking back. There was only a remote chance anybody would bother it, and it

would attract no attention, since everyone would merely assume it belonged to another fisherman.

I came back out on to the secondary road, and had gone less than a half-mile toward the highway when a man and his wife stopped and picked me up. They were from Marathon, and had spinning rods in the back seat. I told them the battery had gone dead in my car and I was going out to the highway to pick up a new one. They dropped me at the filling station and general store. I drank a can of beer and read the Sunday papers until the Key West-Miami bus came through. When I got off at the Greyhound terminal in Miami I ducked into a phone booth and called Justine Laray, a little anxiously because it was already after eight p.m. Call girls didn't stay home all the time. But luck was with me. She was in.

'Where on earth have you been?' she asked. 'I thought you were going to call me Friday.'

'I've been out of town,' I said. 'But, look, do you want to take a little trip? I've got to go up to Palm Beach for a couple of days, and we just might get a chance to look into the gown situation around there.'

'I'd love to go, honey.'

'Pack an overnight bag, and I'll pick you up as soon as I can get loose here. Where you live?'

She gave me her address.

'I'll see you,' I said.

I took a cab over to Miami Beach to the apartment, and changed back into Chapman's clothes. Next I removed all identification and the cards from his wallet, dropped them in the pocket of my jacket, and counted the money in it. Nearly all the cheques were cashed now, and even with the way I'd been throwing it around it came to a little over three thousand, four hundred dollars, mostly in twenties and fifties with four or five hundreds scattered

through it. It made an impressive-looking roll, and the wallet would scarcely bend any more. I shoved it in my pocket, and then made a bundle of the fishing clothes and the cap, making sure my own wallet was still in the trousers.

I called Justine again.

'Look, sex-pot, I'm still tied up in this deal, over in Miami Beach. But I'll tell you what. I thought we'd stay in Hollywood tonight at that motel where I've been, and go on up to Palm Beach tomorrow. So why don't you run on up to Hollywood? I'll just go on out the beach and cut across.'

'But how am I going to get there? And where do I meet you?'

'Hell, take a cab. I'll pay for it. There's a bar—the Cameo Lounge. Meet me there at, say, ten-fifteen.'

I locked the apartment and walked over to where I'd left the Cadillac that morning. I put the fishing clothes in the boot, along with my canvas shoes and a flashlight. Going up to a drugstore in the next block, I got a handful of change, went to the phone booth, and put in a call to Robin Wingard's home address in Thomaston. He was in.

'Oh, hello, Mr. Chapman,' he replied. 'How are you? And did Miss Blaine tell you——'

'You mean the FCC citation?' I interrupted. 'Yeah. I told her to authorize you to get anything you needed to take care of it. But I'm calling about something else.'

'Yes, sir?'

I lowered my voice a little. 'Listen. This is strictly between the two of us; don't even mention it to Miss Blaine. I don't want to worry her. Is Mrs. Forsyth there in town?'

'Why, yes. I saw her on the street just this afternoon.'

'Has she been around the station, or the studio?'

'Why, no-o. She hasn't been to either one.'

'But you are positive she's in town?'

'Oh, yes. Unless she left tonight. But why?'

'I can't go into it now,' I said. 'But here's what I want you to do. Under no circumstances, is she to get into the station, or the studio. If she tries to force her way in, or sneak in, call the police. If necessary, hire Pinkertons.'

'But—I don't understand.'

'I can't explain now. But I'll be there by Tuesday afternoon, and in the meantime don't let her get past you. G'bye.'

I drove to Hollywood, found a place to park near the Cameo shortly before ten-fifteen, and waited. Justine arrived in a taxi about ten minutes later, and went inside. I lit a cigarette and remained where I was for another forty minutes, watching the doorway to be sure she didn't leave. She'd have had two or three drinks by now, and she'd be smouldering.

I went in. It was very dimly lighted, a small place with a precious aspect about it and a Hammond organ that fortunately wasn't being played at the moment. There were six or eight customers. She was at a small table about halfway back, grimly watching the door. She had a new permanent, and was wearing a dark blue dress and white mesh gloves, and the overnight case was on the floor beside her.

'Well! You finally got here,' she said, as I sat down. 'I was just about to go back.'

'Sorry I was late, cutie,' I said. 'Couldn't get away.'

The casual manner and the 'cutie' didn't improve her feelings any, but she was trying to get them under control. It would be poor policy to blast the goose just as it was about to produce the golden egg.

'It's all right,' she said with an effort.

'Well, I wound up the deal.' I stuck a cigarette in the holder and lit it. 'I guess our trip's off, baby.'

'What?'

'Yeah. I can start home in the morning——'

'Well! Of all the stupid——!' The black eyes were venomous. 'After I spend a fortune in cab fare, and sit here like a mope for an hour and a half waitin' for you to decide to show up——'

The bartender and several customers turned and stared.

'Hey,' I said soothingly, 'take it easy, Marian.'

She slammed her drink down. 'And will you, for Chrissakes, stop calling me Marian! I'm sick of it!'

'All right, all right, I'm sorry, honey——' I looked around uncomfortably. 'I didn't mean it. Let's have a drink.'

I motioned for the bartender, who hadn't missed a word of it, and ordered two Martinis. It took several minutes to cool her off. We had another pair of drinks, and decided to go somewhere else. I could see her eye the car appraisingly, though she said nothing. We drove over to the beach to another bar. I was acting a little drunk now, and tried to paw her in the parking lot. She shoved me away.

'Le's ginna back,' I said.

'Oh, shut up!'

We went inside and had two more drinks. I noticed she was leaving most of hers now.

'Why don't we go on to the motel?' she asked. 'We can have some drinks there.'

I bought a bottle of Scotch from the bartender. He didn't want to sell it to me but I persuaded him with an extra five dollars. We drove to the motel. It was after

midnight now, and most of the units were dark. I turned the car and backed it into the carport between the units. I was staggering a little, and as I was fumbling the door open I dropped her bag. It clattered on the step.

'Be careful!' she said angrily.

Inside, I switched on a light, put the Scotch and the bag on the dresser, and started to paw her again. 'Wait a minute, can't you?' she snapped. She slipped off the dress and put it on a hanger in the closet, and took off her shoes. They were blue, with very high heels. I broke the seal on the bottle, and poured two water tumblers half-full.

'Live it up, kid,' I said, handing her one.

'I'm goin' to put a little water in mine,' she said, and went into the bathroom. She closed the door. I quietly unsnapped the overnight case and opened it. She had other shoes, all right. I grabbed out a pair of her nylons, and a pair of pants, shoved them under the mattress on the bed, and closed the bag. When she came out I could tell by the colour of her drink she'd poured most of it out before she added the water.

"S down the ol' hatch," I said, weaving a little, and gulped part of mine. The shoes were lying on the carpet near the corner of the bed. 'Howz bout a kiss?' I said, and stepped toward her. I landed on them, and heard one of the heels snap. So did she.

'Now look what you've done, you stupid idiot!' she lashed out. 'Of all the clumsy, big-mouthed apes!'

I weaved, fixed her with a glassy stare, and contemptuously kicked the shoes under the bed. Hauling out the wallet, I fumbled a fifty out of it and threw it on the bed. 'Go buy self 'nother pair. But don' heave your weight 'round. I could buy you for cat food.'

I tried to stuff the wallet back into my pocket. It fell to the floor. I reached down for it, and fell over. She stared

at me with contempt. I got up, tossed the wallet on the dresser, and went into the bathroom. Turning on the water in the basin, I made a retching sound, and washed my face. When I came out, she was smiling.

'I'm sorry, honey,' she said. 'It was my fault, for leavin' 'em there. Here, let me pour you another little drink.'

'Sgood idea,' I replied. "Pologize. Din mean word of it.' I drank part of the whisky, dropped the glass on the rug, and collapsed on the bed. 'Lie down few mince. Feel better.'

She stretched out beside me, and stroked my face with her hand. 'There, there, honey. Ju-u-st relax. You just had a little too much.'

I closed my eyes. We lay perfectly still for about ten minutes, and then she said, 'Honey?'

'Ummmff?' I muttered, and stirred a little.

She waited another twenty minutes before she tried again. I went on breathing heavily, and made no reply. After a few more minutes she moved cautiously away from me, and got up. I heard the rustle of the dress as she put it back on, and the careful unsnapping of the bag to get the other pair of shoes. I had to listen carefully to hear the door open, but there was a faint click as it closed.

I slid off the bed, parted the curtains at the front window just a fraction of an inch, and peered out. There was no one in sight except her. All the units across the way were dark, and the woman who ran the place had long since gone to bed. She reached the entrance, turned left, toward the centre of town, and disappeared.

She should know enough not to take a cab all the way to Miami and at this time in the morning, so she'd probably head for the bus station. She knew I had her address, and the chances were she wouldn't stop this side of

California. With a married man she could tough it out and play the percentages, but she should be pretty sure by now that I was single. I'd cried enough about what the tax people did to me because of it.

I went over to the dresser. She'd left the wallet. Removing the identification had been superfluous, but it was a precaution I had to take. Chapman was going to be all over the front pages in a few hours, and having his identification turn up somewhere in a garbage can would have been disastrous.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I REPLACED all the identification and the cards in the wallet, and looked at my watch. It was one forty-five. Taking two water tumblers out in the bathroom, I rinsed them and rubbed them with a towel to remove prints. It didn't really matter—the maid would replace them with two fresh ones, wrapped in waxed paper as these had been. I set to work on the three bags, one of which was open on the luggage stand. They were fibreglass, and would probably show prints. I wiped them all over very carefully with the towel to remove any already there, and then replaced them with numbers of deliberately smeared prints—touching them, particularly around the hardware and handles, with my fingers and hands, but always sliding just a little. I did the same thing with all the door-knobs, bathroom fixtures, and the glass top of the dresser. The bottle of whisky I'd take with me, and the one that had been in his luggage originally I'd already thrown away.

I pulled out the nylons and the pair of pants I'd shoved under the mattress, held them under the tap in the wash basin until they were thoroughly wet, squeezed out the excess water, and draped them on a coat hanger from the closet. I hung them from the shower head that projected from the wall above the tub, and then slid the shower curtain about halfway out on its rod so they were hidden from view.

I retrieved the shoes from under the bed. The broken heel was still attached, but dangling. Turning out the lights, I lay down on the bed with a cigarette. It was difficult to stay awake. I'd really had more to drink than I was accustomed to. After about an hour, I got up without

turning on the lights, slipped out the side door into the carport, and unlocked the boot of the Cadillac. Going back inside, I returned with the whisky bottle and the shoes. Stumbling, I fell heavily against the side of the car, bumped once against the wall of the carport, and dropped to the floor. I remained utterly silent for at least five minutes, and then got up with a great scraping of shoes against concrete, bumped against the car once more, put the shoes and bottle in the boot, lowered the lid very gently, and pressed until the latch clicked. I tiptoed back inside, closed the door, and lay down again.

It was nine when I awoke. My clothes were badly rumpled. I had a slight hangover, but it wasn't bad. I washed my face, but didn't shave, and when I appraised myself in the mirror I looked like a man on the wrong end of a two-day binge. Shoving the empty wallet in my pocket, I put on the hat and glasses and took one last look around. Everything was all right. Except for the pants and the nylons drying in the bathroom, there was nothing to indicate a woman had ever been here.

I went out, being careful not to leave any prints on the knob as I closed the door, got in the car, and drove out. The woman who ran the place was in the doorway of the office; she smiled, and I solemnly tipped my hat. It was a few minutes past ten when I reached downtown Miami and finally found a parking place. The briefcase the tapes had been in was on the back seat. I got out with it and walked to the bank.

I wrote out the cheque for a hundred and seventy thousand dollars, and presented it at a window. The teller was a girl. She did a take, raised her eyebrows, looked at me again, and disappeared. I gathered it wasn't every day she cashed cheques in that amount for grimy and dishevelled characters who'd obviously slept in their clothes

and hadn't shaved for a couple of days. Well, I'd expected a certain amount of consternation. I stuck a cigarette in the holder and lit it.

Dakin came out. As I'd suspected before, he never remembered what anybody looked like. He glanced uncertainly around at the people at other windows, and when the girl nodded towards me, he said, 'Ah, yes. Mr. Chapman.' We shook hands.

'Do you really want this in cash?' he asked incredulously.

I stopped humming *The Music Goes Round and Round*, glanced at him as if I thought the question tiresome, and said, simply, 'Yes.'

I knew then they'd already checked the signature against the card and knew it was genuine. They suspected a con game of some kind, or that I was in some kind of trouble at home and had worked out this deal for disappearing with a lot of ready cash, but in the end there was nothing they could do about it. I'd put the money in the bank, so who had a better right to take it out? He did ask, since it was made out to cash and the girl hadn't actually seen me sign it, if I'd mind making out another?

'Not at all,' I said. I made out another, signed it, and said, 'But I'm in rather a hurry, if you don't mind.'

He looked at the signature, and shrugged. There was a slight service charge for transferring the funds. They brought the money, packed it into the briefcase for me, I paid the service charge, tipped my hat politely to the girl, and walked out with the briefcase under my arm.

When I reached the car I placed it on the seat beside me, unzipped it, and removed ten fifties from one of the bundles. I placed them in the wallet and started out US 1. At the edge of Coral Gables there was a large sporting goods store I'd already located. I stopped and bought a

six-foot aluminium car-top boat. While the men were installing the carrier atop the car and securing the boat and oars to it, I walked impatiently up and down, chain-smoking cigarettes and muttering about the delay. It came to a little over a hundred dollars. I gave the clerk three fifties, and when he brought my change, I asked, 'How far is it to Lake Okeechobee?'

'You're headed the wrong way,' he said. 'It's north. Go back——'

'Thanks,' I said, paying no attention. I was already walking out.

It was only a few miles from there to the roadside curio stand. I began watching for it, and when I saw it ahead I checked the mirror to be sure no one was too close behind me. I was clear. I kept booming right on at fifty until I was slightly past the place, and then hit the brakes in a crash stop. Rubber screamed, and the car yawed back and forth across the pavement, finally sliding to a stop on the gravel several hundred yards away. I put it into reverse, and shot backwards, and slid to a stop again right before the place.

The cold-eyed proprietor was waiting on a pair of tourists from Michigan. They were looking at seashells on a long table—or had been. They'd stopped everything now to stare at me. I leaped out of the car and ran over to the row of ornamental flamingos beside the fence. Grabbing one of them up, I lifted it, as if estimating its weight. It was one of the type normally set in paddling pools, with a circular concrete base at the bottom of the thin steel legs.

I turned towards him with an imperious gesture. 'I'll take one of these.'

He regarded me coldly. It was possible, of course, that he didn't like anybody, but I felt sure he remembered

me. 'I'm waiting on these people, mister,' he said. 'What's the hurry?'

'Look,' I said, beginning to shout. 'I didn't stop here to tell you the story of my life. All I want to do is buy one of your goddamned flamingos——'

I grabbed it up in my arms as if to take it to the car, but lost my grip on it and let it drop. It fell over on the gravel. I lunged for it again. At that moment his wife hurried out of the shop and said anxiously, 'I'll take care of these customers, Henry.'

The Michigan couple was fascinated with the performance. Henry grabbed the flamingo away from me and stalked to the car. Nodding curtly to the boot, he asked, 'You got the keys?'

'*The keys?*' I was aghast. 'No, no, no! Put it in here!' I yanked the rear door open. 'On the seat.'

He looked at the pale blue leather and then at me. 'Mister, it ain't none of my business what you do with your car, but you ort to put it in the boot.'

I removed the cigarette holder from my mouth and stared at him in sheer outrage. '*In the boot?* Who the hell ever heard of putting a flamingo in a boot?'

This broke the tourists up at last. They had to turn away, and I heard strangled sounds of laughter.

'I mean—damn it——' I went on, gesturing wildly. 'There's no room. My—my suitcases are in there.'

He dropped the flamingo on the seat. I shoved a fifty-dollar bill in his hand and got in and roared away. As soon as I was out of sight I slowed to forty; there was still a lot of time to put in, and only the remotest chance that Henry would call the police and report me as a menace to navigation. If I were picked up he might have to part with the change from the fifty. I stopped in Homestead and bought a roll of heavy white cord.

It was shortly after two p.m. when I turned off into the large parking area at the Theatre of the Sea, located between Tavernier and Islamorada on the Overseas Highway. It was one of the well-known tourist attractions of the Keys, a large souvenir shop and a fenced area containing the aquarium ponds and tanks stocked with marine life. There were two performing porpoises, and a guide who conducted a tour. I went inside, bought a ticket, and waited for the next tour.

When the crowd was large enough, some fifteen or twenty tourists, we started around, staring at the fish and listening to the lecture. I paid scant attention and spoke to no one until the guide was squatted at the end of one of the ponds coaxing a jewfish to come up and gulp the mullet he had in his hand. In a moment it did, and then settled slowly back into the rather murky water.

The guide rose. I pushed my way through the crowd around him, and demanded, 'Did you say that was a jewfish?'

'That's right,' he replied. 'They're one of the grouper family——'

I stared at him suspiciously. 'I thought they lived in salt water.'

Someone giggled at the rear of the crowd. 'They do,' the guide explained with weary patience. 'These are all salt-water fish.'

I pursed my lips and nodded. 'Just as I suspected. All I can say is it's a hell of a way to treat fish.'

He sighed, opened his mouth to explain that the ponds were filled with sea-water, but turned away with a well-you-run-into-all-kinds expression on his face. The crowd tittered. The tour went on. I remained on the outskirts, aloof and disapproving.

I arrived in Marathon at four-thirty p.m., after stopping

several times along the way to get out and look at the water. One hour and twenty minutes to go. I checked my watch against a time announcement on the car radio to be sure it was still reasonably accurate, and hunted up a bar. It was quiet, with hardly anyone in it, and there was a telephone booth at the rear. There was also one out front on the sidewalk, in case the first happened to be occupied.

I ordered one Scotch and water and nursed it for an hour. The bartender tried once or twice to start a conversation, but I gave no indication I even heard him. At exactly five-fifty, I got up and started out, and then stopped abruptly. 'Oh, my God, I've got to make a phone call——' Getting several dollars' worth of change, I went back to the booth and called Coral Blaine.

'Where are you, dear?' she asked. 'I've been trying to reach you——'

'I'm at Lake Okeechobee,' I replied.

'Then you're on your way home?'

I paid no attention. 'It's funny, though. I keep thinking I've been here before. I've never been in Lake Okeechobee have I?'

'Heavens, dear, I don't know. I've never heard you mention it. But I'm glad you've started back——'

'Tell Wingard it was too late,' I said. 'But he can forget it now.'

'Oh,' she said, a little uncomfortably, I thought. I was listening carefully for clues. 'That was what I wanted to get in touch with you about. He was in this morning——'

And he'd told her, of course. 'It was too late before I figured it out,' I went on, ignoring her completely. 'It wasn't your fault. You kept telling me Marian was there——'

'Darling,' she interrupted, 'couldn't we stay off that subject, just once?'

I nodded. There it was. I was sure now.

'You kept telling me she was,' I continued, 'but I didn't believe you, because I kept seeing her down here. Everywhere I went. What she was doing, of course, was going back and forth. But I don't know why I didn't figure out about the radio station in time. I knew how clever she was——'

'Harris, is this some kind of joke?'

'All she had to do was walk in there and pick up the microphone and spread her lies to everybody in the country, and turn 'em all against me. Make 'em think I didn't treat her fairly. The way they turned against Keith, and it wasn't his fault at all. The girl walked right into his car——'

'Harris——!'

'People believed her, too. I can tell. I see 'em looking at me on the street—— But I stopped her, even if it was too late. She's here with me now.'

'Harris, will you please listen to me? You're mistaken——'

'Oh, no,' I said triumphantly. 'Maybe she's got you believing those lies too. Don't defend her. You know it was all lies. And she is with me. Right here. I've got her out in the car. She broke into my room last night, and when I woke up she was leaning over whispering lies to me. I tried to make her shut up——'

'You don't know what you're saying!' Her voice was growing shrill. 'It's utterly impossible.'

She had turned the knife that Monday morning, but in the field of really exquisite deadliness she was an amateur. While she was sitting there listening to me say I'd just killed Marian Forsyth, Marian was standing at the next desk, talking to Barbara Cullen.

I dropped my voice to a conspiratorial whisper.

'You'll hear from me. I'll be in a foreign country, angel, where they didn't hear the things she told about me, and I'll send for you.'

I hung up.

I went back to the bar, ordered another drink, and sat for ten minutes or so staring moodily at the mounted sailfish above the backbar mirror.

'Beautiful fish,' I said to the bartender. 'You know, they catch a lot of those down in the Keys.'

He was so happy at having somebody to talk to again he did a clown routine. He picked up the bottle from which he'd just poured my drink, stared at it unbelievably, and shook his head. 'Pal, you're right square in the middle of the Keys.'

'Lovely country,' I said. 'Next time you go, you ought to take the whole family; they'd love it.' I got up and went out.

I went on towards Sugarloaf Key, still driving under forty. There were several problematical factors now, but I was sure I had plenty of time and didn't want to make that turn off the highway until it was dark. A lot depended on when she decided to call the Florida highway patrol—if she did at all. It would be the logical thing to do. There was still a good possibility I hadn't really killed anybody, but not much doubt that I was foaming mad and might at any minute. But Marian had insisted her first concern would be getting off the ship herself before it went down, and that she'd chicken out at the prospect of having to call and have her insane fiancé picked up and spread all over the front pages before she had a chance to start disowning him.

But at any rate, she was going to have to tell *somebody*, and that somebody would call the Florida authorities. But the Okeechobee thing should have stuck in her mind;

God knows I'd hit it hard enough. Of course, the operator would have said it was Marathon calling, but nobody ever paid any attention to that, and she'd said it to Mrs. English, anyway. The chances were there would be no alert in this area until they started picking up my trail, and I needed less than an hour now to duck into the hole and pull it in after me.

When I reached Big Pine Key I could see I was still too early, so I pulled off the highway, drove up a back road for a mile or so and parked, still facing away from the highway. Two or three cars went past. If they noticed me, so much the better. It would take a long time to search Big Pine; it was one of the largest of all the Keys.

When it was completely dark, I turned and went back. There wasn't a great deal of traffic on the highway. As I began closing on the turn-off at Sugarloaf there was only one car behind me. I slowed and let it pass, and then made the turn. I speeded up, hurtling over the bumpy country road. In a few minutes I came to the trace of a road going off to the left, and in only two or three more to the openings through the wall of mangroves where boats could be launched. My headlights splashed against the pick-up truck. Aside from it, the place was utterly deserted.

The faint ruts ran on for another two or three hundred yards through heavy brush that scraped the car on both sides, made a sharp turn toward the water, and dead-ended among the mangroves. There was a narrow channel here, going through them to open water, but it was never used for launching boats because the underbrush and mangroves were so heavy on all sides it would be impossible to turn or manoeuvre. I stopped just above high tide, and cut the lights and engine. Impenetrable darkness

closed in around me, and thousands of mosquitos, and utter silence except for the faint lapping of the water. There was no surf, because of the shallow water and the mangrove islands farther out.

Getting out, I fumbled the key into the lock, and opened the boot. When I'd located the flashlight, I turned it on, unfastened the boat, and lifted it down. I dragged it down to the edge of the water, put the oars in it, the concrete flamingo, the ball of cotton cord, and my canvas shoes. Taking out my khaki shirt, I wiped the steering wheel, dash, door handles, and boot handle, and then rubbed and wiped my hands and fingers over them to leave a satisfactory number of unusable prints in case they did start to check.

I opened the whisky, took a drink of it, poured the rest into the water, and threw the bottle far over into the mangroves. Lifting out Justine's shoe with the broken and dangling heel, I dropped it beside the rear of the car, under some overhanging brush, and checked it with the flashlight. It couldn't be too obvious. I nudged it farther out of sight with my foot. Good. I dropped the other shoe in the boat. Closing the car, I pushed off. The water was quite shallow and I had to wade out several steps before I could get aboard.

I sat down and poled it out of the narrow channel with one of the oars. When I reached open water I threw the other shoe overboard. It would move around with the tide, and might or might not be found, but it made no difference. I turned off the flashlight and began rowing parallel to the shore, watching the dark wall of the mangroves. In a few minutes I could see the break in them, and pulled in to the beach. I switched on the flashlight again, and saw the pick-up truck. Pulling the boat up, I squeezed the water out of my trouser legs, took off the

wet leather shoes, and put on the canvas ones. They had corrugated crepe-rubber soles.

I carried the flamingo up, unlocked the boot, and placed it on the floor in front. Then the ball of cord, and the wet shoes. I put the oars in back, carried up the boat, and placed it on top of them. Carrying the flashlight, I followed the ruts on through the brush to the Cadillac. I walked towards the edge of the water, threw the light in, and could see the marks of the boat and my tracks on the soft bottom as I'd waded out. The leather shoes had left some fairly good imprints above high tide, also, and I walked down, leaving the distinctive track of the canvas ones on top of them in places.

I opened the boot and took out the steel wrecking bar I'd bought. Slamming the lid down so it locked, I stuck the flat end of the bar under the edge of it and began prying upward. It was stubborn, and I had a large area of steel bent and chewed before the lock finally gave up and it flew open. Then I closed and locked all the doors, and used the end of the bar to knock in the right front window so I could reach the latch. I rifled the glove compartment, leaving everything strewn on the floor. Taking out the briefcase and my fishing clothes, I took one last look around with the flashlight to be sure I hadn't overlooked anything, and walked back to the truck.

Standing in the darkness, with the mosquitos chewing me, I took off his suit, shirt, and tie. I dropped the glasses in one coat pocket, bent the hat into a mass of straw, and shoved it in the other. I put on the khaki fishing clothes and the cap, transferred the money from his wallet to my own, put his back in his trousers, along with the cigarette holder, lighter, and his car keys. Taking the flashlight, I went down to the edge of the water and made a mark by which to gauge the tide.

Placing the light on the seat of the truck, I wrapped his clothes around the long steel legs and curving neck of the flamingo, and tied them with the ball of white cord. There was a hundred yards of it, and I used it all. I looked at my watch. It was only shortly after eight. There were cigarettes and matches in the glove compartment of the truck. I lit one and sat down, suddenly conscious that I was tired. It had been the day-long tension; and I remembered now I never had eaten anything. At nine I went down and looked at my mark. The tide was coming in. That was all right; I didn't want to go out on to the highway with that boat until at least midnight. Of course, even if they were looking for him they didn't know yet that he'd had a boat, but they would later.

At one a.m. the tide was at slack high water as nearly as I could tell. I drove out to the highway. There were very few cars on it now, passing at widely spaced intervals I waited until there was no one coming from westward before pulling on to it, and drove fast so as not to be overtaken. The oncoming cars, of course, could see nothing but my headlights.

At the approach to the Bahia Honda bridge a road led down off the highway to a picnic ground at the edge of the channel. I drove down, got out with the flashlight, and threw the beam outward on to the water. The tide was ebbing now, beginning to swirl around the pillars of the bridge.

I carried the boat down, put it in the water, and swamped it. It had flotation units, of course, and didn't sink entirely. I shoved. It disappeared downstream in the darkness, headed seaward on the tide, at least fifteen miles from the car. It might not be found for days, or even weeks. I threw the oars in, and then the steel wrecking bar, heaving it as far as I could into deeper water.

Nothing remained now except the flamingo. I placed it on the seat beside me in its mummy wrappings of clothes. The Bahia Honda channel was the deepest in the Keys, and the bridge the highest, so no fishing was permitted from it. Waiting until no cars were coming, I shot on to the highway and up the incline of the bridge. When I reached the top, at mid-channel, I slammed on the brakes and hopped out. One pair of headlights was coming towards me, still over a mile away. I ran around the truck, yanked the door open, and heaved the flamingo over the rail.

It was a few minutes past five a.m. when I backed into the driveway at the apartment and put the truck in the garage. I went inside, turned on the air-conditioning unit, and poured an enormous drink of whisky. I was wrung out, and empty, and felt dead. I'd been onstage continuously for just a few hours less than thirteen days.

It was complete now. That was the whole package, and looking at it as objectively as I could, I didn't think they'd ever untie it. I dropped the briefcase on the bed and started to open the zipper. Then I shrugged, pushed it off on to the floor and lay down. It didn't seem to matter whether it was full of money or wallpaper samples. All I wanted was Marian Forsyth.

This struck me as an odd reaction for Jerome Langston Forbes. Maybe I'd been somebody else for so long I'd forgotten my own behaviour patterns.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I SHAVED off the moustache the next morning, lay in the sun in the back yard for a few hours to erase the faint difference in the tan on my upper lip, and got a haircut, a short brush job. If the barber even suspected the bleached effect on the outer ends wasn't entirely due to the sun, he merely thought I was queer.

The story broke a little more slowly than we'd anticipated, but once it did it gathered momentum like a rocket. On Wednesday morning Harris Chapman was a prominent Louisiana businessman who was reported missing somewhere in the Lake Okeechobee area after an apparently incoherent telephone call to his private secretary—and two days later the headlines were screaming FLAMINGO KILLER.

I could piece the sequence together pretty well from the newspaper accounts. Coral Blaine waited a full twenty-four hours before notifying the Florida highway patrol and asking them to make a search. She had no address except that I'd said I was in Lake Okeechobee, and reported I'd talked in a 'rambling' fashion. Maybe I'd had a sun-stroke. To the police it meant merely another drunk. But it got into the paper on Wednesday morning, complete with name, and then the deluge began.

I gathered the Antilles Motel was first. I'd been missing forty-eight hours by then. My room wasn't paid for after Sunday, but she wasn't particularly worried, since the luggage was still there. The police probably pricked up their ears then. If this was a binge, it was a honey. The pants and stockings probably weren't mentioned at first,

but the motel did lead to Fitzpatrick, and Fitzpatrick to the bank, and then it began to hit the fan in handsful. Drawing out that much money in cash was highly irregular, and they'd disapproved—How much money? A hundred and seventy thousand dollars.

A hundred and—*what? In cash?*

By this time police lieutenants and city editors were probably trying to juggle three telephones at once. The money hit the headlines on Thursday morning, a hundred and seventy thousand in twenty, fifty, and a hundred dollar bills, in a briefcase. That was fine. The sooner, and the longer the time between this and the eventual finding of the car, the better.

Then the motel again, and the stockings and pants. No. Nobody'd ever seen a girl, and I'd left there alone that morning. Then, probably, the bartender at the Cameo, though it was happening so fast now it was impossible even to guess the sequence of the explosions. Girl with an overnight case. Argument. He'd called her Marian, and she flipped her lid. Who was she? Just a babe, and from the language she used— Then who was Marian? Tell me, Jack, I never heard of her.

The bartender at the second place remembered us together. Somebody *had* heard a girl's voice say something about one o'clock that morning when I'd driven into the motel. And some bumpings in the car park some time later. And the car was *backed* in. And there was nothing, absolutely nothing, in the room to indicate a woman had ever been there except the one thing a man would be certain to overlook if it happened to be out of sight.

The picture was developing fast now, and you could imagine what it was like around the detective squad-rooms and city desks with the headlines and the story

almost in sight. *Missing millionaire may have slain night-life girl.* Then Naples and the mysterious Marian again, and the car-top boat, and Lake Okeechobee. Then Coral Blaine's admission, at long last, as to what I'd really said, and the flood burst.

But in the end it was Henry who clinched it, and topped them all, and gave it the tag every sensational story has to have. *Flamingo. The Flamingo Killer. Flamingo Mystery Girl.* There were pictures of Henry, and of Henry's curio stand, and of Henry's pink birds with their reinforcing-steel legs and sinuous concrete necks. Henry's 'as told to' first-person story appeared on the front page of one edition. I'd been there once before, and he'd recognized me. He'd even told me, he recalled, that the flamingos were made of concrete. And this time I was going past at about seventy and all of a sudden I saw the flamingos or remembered 'em and slammed on my brakes and backed up and grabbed one to see how heavy it was— And then, when he'd asked me to open the boot I'd gone pale and sweaty and shaky and there was a wild crazy look in my eyes, and I'd screamed, 'No, no, no!' And then I'd said, 'Who the hell ever heard of putting a flamingo in a boot?' Oh, I was crazy, all right. There was no doubt I was crazy as a loon.

The police, of course, had already checked the telephone company and learned the long-distance call had been made from Marathon. At first this raised some doubt I was as insane as I was trying to appear to be, since it looked like the workings of a logical mind deliberately throwing the police a false trail. But after talking to the guide at the Theatre of the Sea and that bartender at Marathon they decided it was probable I did think I was at Lake Okeechobee. And I'd admitted to Coral I was puzzled by the fact it was somehow familiar. I'd been in

Marathon for three days only the week before. The erratic pattern was there, the utter derangement alternating with moments of purpose and relative lucidity. I'd been in a screaming hurry at Henry's place, and then I'd stopped for an hour to gawk at fish and leaping porpoises while the body of a dead girl was folded in the boot of my car.

But what girl? That was still a mystery.

Two Deputy Sheriffs found the car on Thursday afternoon about five o'clock. That was nearly four days after it was abandoned and some twelve hours after it was known all over the State that it probably had a hundred and seventy thousand dollars in it. The story was plain. I'd gone out in the ocean in a six-foot boat with a girl's body and a concrete flamingo, and I'd never come back. Some man wearing rubber-soled shoes had come along later, prised open the boot, and made off with the hundred and seventy thousand dollars. They found the blue shoe with the broken heel.

And by Friday morning they were pretty sure who the girl was. They finally located the taxi driver who'd taken her to Hollywood. He remembered where he'd picked her up. The girl's name was Justine Laray, the paper said, and her occupation was unspecified, but she had a police record in Miami and in Pittsburgh for soliciting, vagrancy, and one conviction for shop-lifting. Nobody in her apartment house could recall having seen her since Sunday night. Some of her clothes were still in the apartment, but nobody knew just how many things she'd had. There was no suitcase at all. But the taxi driver and the Cameo bartender both swore she'd had only one with her. So maybe that was all she had. They were both sure she'd worn blue shoes.

On December 2, just a week after the car was aban-

doned, two fishermen found the boat near Pigeon Key, some twenty-five miles from where the car had been. No body was found. Of course they didn't expect to find the girl's if it was tied to the flamingo, but Chapman's should have come ashore. They nearly always did, in drownings. The police were suspicious of this, but admitted it could have become snagged in coral along the reefs or wound up in the impenetrable tangle of mangroves along the shore.

A lot of space was given to Marian and her former relationship with him, but as far as I could determine from the papers she was never suspected. What could they suspect her of? Driving him mad by remote control? She was in Thomaston all the time; that was established from the first day. They ran a picture of him—probably the one she'd mentioned—but there was more glamour and character than resemblance, and it had been taken without the glasses. If anything, it looked less like him than I did.

And not once from beginning to end, as well as I could tell from the papers, did anybody ever question the fact that it was Chapman.

As she had pointed out, why should they? He said that was his name. And what reason would he have for lying about it? Would somebody pretend to be Chapman, just to go mad and drown?

After two weeks other sensations began to crowd it off the front page, but it didn't die entirely. Several things kept it alive. One was the continuing search for the man who had looted the car, and for Chapman's body. Then there was the concrete flamingo; that had caught the morbid public fancy.

But everybody had accepted it now, and we were safe. She'd write, or call, and let me know where she was.

She didn't. Another week went by. I was growing to hate the apartment. Being away from her was bad enough but being reminded of her every minute I was in the place made it unbearable. And *he* was in it. I had the rug shampooed, and all the time the men were working on it I wondered if I were going as mad as Lady Macbeth.

But I couldn't leave. I could have had the mail forwarded, of course, but suppose she telephoned? There was no way at all I could find out where she was. Presumably she'd left Thomaston, but she was supposed to get in touch with me. I waited, hating the place but hating to leave it, even for food. Even when I was sunbathing in the back yard I left the door open so I'd be able to hear the phone. Two hours before the postman was due I was pacing the floor by the front window, watching for him.

Then, on December 18, it came at last. It was early in the morning. The boy had thrown the paper up on the walk and I was starting out to get it when a Post Office van stopped and the driver got out with an Airmail Special. It was from Houston, Texas. I ran back inside, forgetting the paper, and tore it open.

Dear Jerry:

This is a very difficult letter to write, but I've avoided it as long as I can. I lied to you. I suppose you have begun to realize that by now, and I'm not asking for forgiveness, but I do think I should have the courage to face you and admit it. So if you still want to, will you come to see me here at the Rice Hotel?

Sincerely,

Marian.

I stared at it, bewildered. What did she mean, she'd lied to me? And then, suddenly, I remembered the other thing she'd said, that night of the 13th. 'I took advantage of you.' None of it made any sense. She hadn't lied about anything, as far as I could see.

But I was wasting time like a fool when I could be on my way to Houston. I grabbed the phone and began calling for reservations. I could get a flight out at one p.m. That would give me just about time enough to pick up the money. It was in a safe-deposit box in a Miami Beach bank. I hurried into the bedroom, changed clothes, and started packing. The phone rang. The airline, I thought, as I picked it up.

'Mr. Forbes? I have a telegram from Houston, Texas. The text reads as follows: URGENT DISREGARD LETTER SEE NEWS STORY. There is no signature.'

'Thank you,' I said. I hung up and ran out in the yard for the paper I'd completely forgotten.

It was on the front page, date-lined New Orleans but with the usual eye-catching local headline tag:

—FLAMINGO CASE—

NONSENSE, SAYS PSYCHIATRIST

I sat down, feeling a chill of apprehension.

New Orleans, La. Dec. 18—Dr. J. C. Willburn, well-known professor of psychiatry and author of a number of books on mental illness, stated today that in his opinion it was highly improbable if not completely absurd that Harris Chapman could have deteriorated from apparent good mental health to a psychotic condition in two weeks, no matter how deep-seated his feeling of guilt.

Dr. Willburn, who is on leave of absence, became

interested in the case at its outset, and for the past three days has been in Thomaston interviewing dozens of Chapman's friends and associates. He says he unearthed no prior instances of hallucination or irrational behaviour at all and that the picture he has of Chapman is that of a practical, hard-driving, relatively insensitive, vigorous man in the prime of life, too given to hard work for brooding or much introspection——'

The whole thing exploded in the papers again. The police said they'd never ruled out the possibility the insanity was faked. I was scared all over again, but what was even worse I didn't dare try to get in touch with her. But at least I could get out of the damned apartment, because I knew now where she was. I cancelled the lease by paying an extra month's rent, and moved to the Eden Roc Hotel. I bought some expensive clothes and luggage, spending money like a maharajah, and I drank too much.

The story went on. Another psychiatrist intimated that Willburn's statement was ill-advised. Nobody could form a psychiatric opinion from second-hand evidence gleaned from lay observers; Chapman could have been in a potentially dangerous mental condition for months. A third psychiatrist said the second psychiatrist was ill-advised. The police were still suspicious of the fact his body had never been found. And by now they knew I'd bought the wrecking bar. The man in Palm Beach who'd sold it to me gave them a good description. So was this the act of a madman buying a weapon to defend himself against a woman he'd wronged, or that of a coldly logical schemer buying it to jimmy open his own car and fake the theft along with the rest of the fantastic hoax?

But what object could he have had?

By now it was almost inevitable. On December 20, when I grabbed the paper off the breakfast trolley in my hotel room and spread it open, the bottom began falling out of everything.

—FLAMINGO CASE—
WAS CHAPMAN
REALLY CHAPMAN?

The story didn't mean anything itself; it was merely a rehash of all the old evidence with the addition of a lot of conjecture. But now that the question had finally been asked, they'd check those signatures, start pinpointing descriptions— But I had to be sure before I ran, so I could warn her. I waited. It was like walking on eggs. Two hours later the afternoon papers were out.

RIDICULOUS, SAYS
CHAPMAN FIANCEE

The police had already questioned her about that, she explained to the reporter in a long-distance interview. Of course she'd talked to Mr. Chapman. He'd called her every day. She would never understand what hold that woman—Mrs. Forsyth—had over him, or what she had said or done that goaded him beyond endurance—

Stripped of the vituperation, it said simply: The man she'd talked to was Chapman.

I grabbed the phone and called the travel desk. 'Get me a reservation to Houston on the first flight you can.'

The girl called back five minutes later and said there'd been a cancellation and I could get out at eleven-thirty. It was ten now. I started throwing things in bags. I'd already bought an attaché case with a good lock; calling the desk to get my bill ready and send a boy for the bags, I ducked

out to a cab, and went to the bank. In a cubicle in the safe-deposit vault, I emptied the bundles of currency into the case, took the same cab back, and told the driver to wait while I checked out. We made it to the airport with five minutes to spare. I was over the weight allowance, and had to pay excess baggage. They were just starting to pull away the loading ramp when I sprinted out the gate with the attaché case under my arm.

I had to change planes in New Orleans. It was seven-thirty p.m. when we came in at Houston International. I hurried to the first booth and called the Rice Hotel.

'Mrs. Forsyth,' I said.

'Just a moment. I'm sorry, sir. She isn't registered.'

I fought down an impulse to yell at her. 'But she was there——'

'I'll connect you with the desk, sir.'

'Never mind,' I said. I collected my luggage and caught a cab into town, and went to the Rice.

The clerk consulted his records. 'Yes, sir. She checked out two days ago. No forwarding address.'

'All right, give me a room,' I said.

I tipped the boy and as soon as he left I flipped through the phone book to detective agencies. Several had night numbers listed. I called one.

He arrived in about thirty minutes, an untidy and owl-like-looking man named Krafft. I told him what I wanted.

'She was here at the hotel until two days ago,' I said. 'Just find out where she went, as fast as you can. I don't even know whether she had a car. If she left town, the chances are it would be by air, so try the airlines first.'

He called back in less than an hour. 'Mrs. Forsyth left here the afternoon of the eighteenth on an American Airlines flight to San Francisco.'

'Good,' I said. 'Does your agency have an office there?'
'Yes, sir. All major cities.'

'Okay, look—— Wire or teletype right now and tell them to start on it. If they find her, keep track of her. I don't care what it costs. I'll be at the Mark Hopkins Hotel, just as soon as I can get there.'

I couldn't get out until the next day. It was ten-thirty p.m. when I checked in at the Mark Hopkins. I'd wired for a reservation. There was a note waiting for me to call a Mr. Ryan, at a Garfield number. As soon as I was up in the room I called him.

'Mr. Ryan? This is Forbes, at the Mark Hopkins.'

'Oh, yes, Mr. Forbes. About Mrs. Forsyth——'

'Have you found her?' I broke in.

'Not yet. She arrived here the night of the eighteenth and registered at the Palace. Checked out at two-thirty p.m., eighteenth, no forwarding address. We've covered all the airlines and railroads, so apparently if she's left town it was by bus or private car. But she left the hotel by cab. We haven't been able to find the driver yet. She might have taken an apartment, or be visiting a friend. Can you give us any hints? I mean, apart from the description?'

'Yes,' I said. 'She went to Stanford, so you might try around Palo Alto; she could be looking up somebody down there. I doubt she's looking for a job, but if she does, it'll probably be in a brokerage house. She has a beautiful flair for clothes. Keep an eye on the City of Paris and I. Magnin's, and so on. If she's taken an apartment it will probably be in a good neighbourhood.'

'We're checking the apartment angle now. Utilities, and so on.'

'All right,' I said. 'Just find her. Use as many men as you can put on it.'

They found her the next afternoon. Ryan called a little after five. 'You were right about the Palo Alto thing. She's been down there. She came back today, and registered at the Fairlane Hotel. It's a fairly small place, on Stockton. Room six hundred and eight.'

'Thanks a million,' I said. 'Just send me your bill.'

I depressed the switch, looked up the number, and gave it to the operator.

'Mrs. Forsyth, please,' I said, when the Fairlane answered.

'One moment, sir.'

The phone buzzed twice. 'Hello.' It was her voice. I could almost see her.

'Marian!' I said. 'Marian——'

She screamed.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It was five o'clock and traffic was snarled. When we were within a block of it I tossed the driver a dollar and ran. I didn't even pause at the desk. When I got out of the elevator, I asked the operator, 'Six hundred and eight?' He pointed to the right.

It was the third door. I rapped. She opened it almost at once. She was a little thinner, and very pale, but as smooth and striking as ever. She was wearing a dark tailored suit. I pushed the door shut. There was the same wonderful, slender feel of her in my arms. I kissed her. She tried. I could feel her trying, but she couldn't quite do anything with it. It was no wonder, I thought, with what had just happened. But it was impossible to let her go. I kissed her eyelids and her throat, and the smooth dark hair.

Finally she whispered. 'You did have one very small piece of luck, Jerry; I'm not much given to crying. Otherwise you'd need a shower curtain.'

'Why?'

'Your kissing me this way after what I did to you.'

'What did you do?'

'I sold you out, I suppose you'd call it, in about the most cynical way it would be possible to do it.'

'You're not making any sense,' I said.

'I think we'd better sit down,' she suggested. 'Take the armchair.' She sat on the side of the bed. I looked around. It was any small hotel bedroom anywhere—Venetian blinds, glass-topped desk, telephone, greyish carpet, and twin beds with dark green spreads and metal headboards finished to resemble limed oak. She crossed her knees and

pulled down her skirt. I looked at the slender, tapering fingers.

'Why did you run away from Houston?' I asked. 'I was going to warn you if it became serious.'

'I wasn't running from the police,' she said. 'From you. I lost my nerve again.'

'Will you go with me to Reno tonight and marry me?'

She closed her eyes and lowered her face slightly. Then she shook her head. 'No, Jerry.'

'Will you go away with me without marrying me?'

'Please, Jerry——' She stopped, but then made an effort and went on. 'I've already told you I lied to you. About our going away together. Maybe I wasn't consciously lying at the time, I don't know. I might even have thought I could do it. But that isn't the point.'

'Listen, Jerry,' she went on, 'I asked you to do something criminal, for money. As long as you were cynical enough to do it for money, only half the responsibility was mine. Do you understand? But then you said you'd changed your mind. You wouldn't do it. But you were in love with me, you said. So I said, that's fine, Jerry. If you won't commit a crime for money, commit a crime because you're in love with me——'

Her hands were twisted tightly together and shaking, and she stopped for an instant and clenched her teeth to stop the tremor of her chin. It was as if her whole face had already shattered, and she was merely holding it together with an effort of will.

——After all, old men commit sexual offences against children somewhere every day, don't they? So let's be efficient. Let's don't waste a nice handy thing like your being in love with me, when it could be put to some practical use, like luring you into becoming involved in a capital crime and ruining your life——'

I reached over and caught her arms. 'Will you stop it? The whole thing was my fault. If I'd had the guts of an angleworm I could have made you give it up.'

She shook her head. 'There's no way you could have stopped me, Jerry. You don't stop a blind obsession like that. The only thing I could see was that I'd lost everything after it was already too late to start over again, so the thing to do, obviously, was to destroy everybody else too. Including you.'

'I'm not destroyed, if you mean Chapman. After what he did to you, he doesn't bother me.'

'He will,' she said. 'Unless you get the fact firmly fixed in your mind that you didn't do it. I did.'

'Cut it out,' I told her. 'We both did it. But do you think it will continue to hold up? Remember, if they ever put a real expert on those forgeries they're going to look very fishy.'

'There's no reason they ever should. However, I'd like to point out something; you're in the clear, even if they find out it was an impersonation. They can't prove you ever met me before it happened. You were using the name of Hamilton, remember. And when I came down from New York, I called you as Mrs. Forbes, but I used another name on the plane tickets. Also, en route from the airport to the apartment, I switched taxis in Miami.'

I nodded. 'When can I bring the money over to you?'

'Tomorrow,' she said apathetically. 'It doesn't matter.'

'It wasn't the money at all, was it?'

'No.' Then she added. 'Or maybe I tried to think it was, partly.'

I lit a cigarette and walked across the room to look out at Stockton Street through the slats of the blind. I came back and stopped in front of her. 'Is it just the voice?' I asked.

She shook her head. 'No. That thing when you called just now was only because I was off guard, and didn't know you were anywhere near. The principal reason I don't want to go with you is that I've done you enough harm already. Why add to it?'

'Did the other men who've been in love with you have this same trouble getting a message through?' I asked. 'Did any of them ever manage to convince you that *you* might be the thing he needed, or wanted, or cared about?'

Her hands were beginning to twist and shake again. 'Jerry, please don't.'

'No,' I said. I crushed out the cigarette. 'If I hadn't given up too easily the other time, I might have won. So this time I'm going to try just once more. And after that I'll shut up for good.' I squatted beside the bed, balancing myself on my toes with my forearms across her lap. 'I know you don't love me,' I said. 'Maybe you've been hacked down so thoroughly it'll be years before you can care anything about anybody. But I'll settle for less. I'll try to say this without slopping over or getting too sticky about it. I just want you. I want to be with you. I want to try to help you. Maybe together we can still work this out some way; at least we could try. We'll go *anywhere* you say, on any terms you want, if you'll just give me a chance. After a while I think you'd associate the voice with me instead of with him. I don't think they ever made anybody else like you, and probably they never will again. I'm crazy about you, and I always will be. But that's enough of that. I think you've quit trying to deny that I'm in love with you. It's just a question of whether you'll go with me. Will you, Marian?'

I looked up at her. She'd turned her face away, and the chin was locked again and she was crying without making

any sound at all. She looked at me at last, and shook her head.

I stood up. She started to come with me to the door, but stopped with one hand resting on the back of the chair. By this time she could trust herself to speak, and she said, 'Good night, Jerry,' and held out her hand.

'Good night, Marian.' I looked back from the open doorway, and, as always, she reminded me of something very slender and beautifully made and expensive—and utterly wasted—like a Stradivarius in a world in which the last musician was dead. I closed the door and went on down the hall.

She killed herself that night. She must have taken the capsules shortly after I left, as nearly as I could tell from the medical reports in the news. There was nothing about it in the morning papers, of course, and I still didn't know it until noon when I walked into the El Prado bar on Union Square with a *Call-Bulletin* under my arm.

I spread it open and took a sip of the Martini.

SUICIDE CONFESSES

Mrs. Marian Forsyth, 34

It caught me without defence at all and kept swamping me and I couldn't get it under control. I pretended to choke on the Martini and got the handkerchief out and honked and sputtered and snorted while I was heading for the men's room to spare the dowagers behind the snowy tablecloths and half-acre menus the sight of a grown man crying in the El Prado in broad daylight. Fortunately, there was no one in the john. I was all right by that time, and could wash my face and go back outside. I folded the *Call* and drained the Martini and walked all the way back up Nob Hill to the Mark. I sat down on the bed to read it, but it was a long time before I even

opened the paper. She was dead; what else mattered? The headline said something about a confession, and it occurred to me that if she had left one they'd be here for me before very long. I really ought to do something about it.

Why hadn't I left her alone? She had that absurd feeling of responsibility for my being mixed up in the thing, and apparently my presence reminded her of it. Maybe if I'd stayed away from her she might have been able to handle the other thing.

And I could have stopped her that night if I'd said no and stuck with it. I rubbed a hand across my face. It was nice to think about it now. And I had a hunch now wasn't the only time I was going to think about it.

I read the story. She'd died of an overdose of sleeping pills. The medical examiner believed she had been dead since before midnight, and that she must have taken them very early in the evening.

I thought of her alone in her agony. She had no one. She had a bleak, miserable, impersonal hotel room and her own courage and that almost unshakable poise, and that was it. She hadn't asked for any help, or cried out. She'd merely held out her hand, and said, 'Good night, Jerry,' and waited for me to leave so she could take the train.

Christ, I thought shakily, I've got to stop this. I'll be walking out the window.

There were two notes. The first was to the local police and contained instructions regarding the burial arrangements. The second read:

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

On 28 November, 1917, an automobile belonging to Mr. Harris Chapman of Thomaston, Louisiana, was found abandoned on Sugarloaf Key, in the State

of Florida. It is believed that Mr. Chapman is dead, but this has never been officially ascertained.

Mr. Chapman is dead. I destroyed him. I am solely responsible for this act, and may God have mercy on me.

In making the above statement, I am aware that I shall be dead within the next few hours.

(Signed) Mrs. Marian Forsyth.

I went over to the window and stood looking out. I was free now of even the possibility of suspicion or arrest. Down in the hotel safe was an attaché case containing almost a hundred and seventy thousand dollars. It was all mine—money, immunity, everything. I was the beneficiary of a tormented girl who had just committed suicide in a hotel room. And I couldn't even go to her funeral.

She'd asked to be buried in a little country churchyard only a few miles from Thomaston. What would I do if somebody spoke to me? Pretend to be mute? All I could do was send flowers.

She took all the blame for this thing we had done, gave me all the money, and I sent flowers to her funeral.

Well. I'd been looking for a free ride all my life, hadn't I? So now I had one.

I went to Mexico—not to Acapulco, but to a little fishing village just up the coast from La Paz, in Baja California, where there were no tourists, practically no accommodations, and no one who spoke English. It seemed that now I had plenty of money, all I wanted to do was live like a beachcomber. I wore dungarees and swimming trunks and lived on *tortillas* and beans and drank nothing at all.

After a while I quit waking up with the cry frozen in my throat as she went over the bridge railing and fell down through the fog, and gradually I quit staring at darkness for hours on end with that thing running through my mind: *why hadn't I stopped her?* She was caught in a blind obsession, not knowing—or perhaps not even caring—that if she killed Chapman it would destroy her. But I'd known it, hadn't I? I'd been warned. And I'd failed her.

For the only time in my glib and cheaply cynical, wise-guy existence I'd really meant something that I said, and I hadn't been able to make her understand it or believe me. I simply hadn't tried hard enough. During those twenty minutes in the apartment that night I'd had the opportunity to stop this obscene and senseless waste of a woman who was worth a thousand of me, and I'd muffed it, and let her go on down the drain, and if I didn't stop lying here at night thinking of how many years of my life I'd give just for one more chance at those twenty minutes I'd go mad. That was the thing I had to whip.

But it was going away. I was slowly whipping it. And even if the Mexicans heard me when I woke in the night, it didn't matter. They didn't understand English.

She had wanted to confess, there in that last hour, but it was evident that she was driven by an equally strong, or even stronger, compulsion to protect me for the rest of my life. She felt responsible for me. It was a sort of *noblesse oblige*. She was older than I was, and more intelligent, and she felt she had taken advantage of the fact that I had fallen in love with her.

I thought about guilt. That was the theme. She was going to kill Chapman and make it appear he had been destroyed by his own conscience and his haunting fear of the taint of mental illness. It had worked, and then she'd

inevitably been destroyed by *her* overpowering burden of guilt. It went on, like a string of popping firecrackers setting each other off.

Except that here it stopped. I had no feeling of guilt for him, not any more. In the first place, I had a much more elastic conscience; it had been stretched considerably over the years to fit different shapes of situations. And I hated him, furthermore, for what he had done to her. And in the end, I hadn't actually killed him anyway. Perhaps that was the final irony of it. She'd told me how to save myself.

Always hold on to that, she'd said. *You didn't do it. I did.*

Three months passed, and I knew I was all right. It was all going away. The police couldn't touch me, and I was safe in that epidemic infection of guilt. Marble shattered, but not rubber.

I went back to San Francisco in the spring, completed transferring the money from the safe-deposit box into three banking accounts, and booked a passage on a Grace Line freighter for the Canal zone. I knew now what I was going to do—go into business as a big-game fishing guide in the Gulf of Panama. I'd liked Panama, and there was a boatyard I knew there where I could have a magnificent sports fisherman built for much less than I could in the States, a real sixty-thousand-dollar job with the best of everything.

But in the week before the ship sailed there was one thing I had to do before I left for good. I flew to New Orleans. First, I spent two days in the public library, going back through the newspaper files. There was no further mention of the case after the latter part of February; it was apparently headed for oblivion, unsolved—not *if* she had done it, of course, but how.

The police were almost certain now that she had left her hotel in New York that night of 13 November and flown to Miami under the name of Mrs. Wallace Cameron. Then they'd lost her trail in Miami. The night clerk at the Dauphine remembered he'd given Chapman a letter when he checked in, and that Chapman had asked for a cab and gone out somewhere within a few minutes after arriving, but whether it had been to meet her nobody would ever know. Had she come to kill him? Or to taunt him with something guilty in his past that eventually drove him mad?

Three handwriting experts were convinced that the signatures on the two cheques and the receipts were forgeries, while Coral Blaine and Lundgren were just as strongly convinced the man they had talked to could have been no one but Chapman. Police had followed my trail back and forth across Florida, and while they had a dozen different versions as to my age and the colour of my hair and eyes, the composite picture was that of Chapman, just as she had said it would be. The only things the witnesses were certain about were the wrong things, the ones I'd deliberately planted.

Chapman Enterprises was being liquidated by his father. Coral Blaine was gone from Thomaston. The whole senseless tragedy was complete, except for *how*, and that was unanswerable. But they did know who had been responsible for it all, because she had admitted it—the rejected and embittered woman who had been his mistress.

I hired a car and drove up-state, buying the flowers at one of the towns along the way. The name of the little community was Bedford Springs, but it wasn't on any of the highway maps, and all I knew about it was that it was some fifteen miles from Thomaston.

I'd puzzled for a long time as to why she'd wanted to be buried in a backwoods churchyard in Louisiana when her family would be in Cleveland. Then I'd finally decided perhaps something good had happened to her in Bedford Springs at some time in the past. I'd understood her coming to San Francisco, where she'd been married to Forsyth, and the trip down to Stanford, and what she was doing in those last few days when she knew it couldn't go on any longer.

It was late afternoon when I found it. It was miles off the highway, and there wasn't any town at all, just a white frame church set under some oaks in gently rolling country of small farms and hardwood and pine. There weren't even any houses near it. It was late April now, and all the trees were fully leaved. I got out of the car in front of the church and walked down to the little cemetery that was fenced and appeared to be well-tended. Across the back of it was a row of slender *arbor vitae* and beyond that a wooded ravine and tall trees, and off to my right about a half-mile a man was ploughing on the side of a sandhill with a mule. There was no sound at all except that of the birds and the trickling of water somewhere in the rave.

I found her grave, and put the flowers on it, and looked around, thinking it was one of the most remote and beautiful places I'd ever seen. Then suddenly I knew why she had remembered it in that final hour of her torment in the hotel room in San Francisco, and what it had represented to her. Peace. Just peace. It hit me without any warning, as it had in the El Prado bar, and I started crying. I couldn't help it.

I sat in the car and stared across the railroad tracks at the cotton gin. On the side of it was a large sign that said:

CHAPMAN ENTERPRISES. The day I ever felt any guilt for him, I thought—that would really be the day. I'd never owned any part of her for an hour, and she'd given him all of herself for six years and then he'd thrown her away as if she were something you merely bought and used like an expendable item of inventory.

The town was as familiar as if I'd lived in it for years. The street names clicked and fell into place in my mind as I drove across it. I found her house and parked in front of it in the lengthening shadows of the elms. It was a two-story white frame with a neat lawn and some nasturtium beds in front, only four blocks from the centre of town. When the weather was nice she sometimes walked to work. I got out of the car.

Somehow it wasn't late afternoon now, but early morning, and I could see her ahead of me in the sunlight with that beautiful walk she had and the erect, patrician slenderness and the smartness that must have appeared so out of place in this little farming town, and the sleek dark head, complete with the shallow saucer of a hat slanted across the side of it, the one she'd worn the night she came back from New York. And, somehow, even though I was behind her I could see the fine blue eyes that were almost but not quite violet and their nearly unshakable self-possession and poise, and the cool and ineffably feminine humour in them as she leaned her chin on her laced fingers that afternoon in Key West and asked, *And what other personality problems do you have, Mr. Hamilton, besides shyness?* And the same eyes filled with the sheen of tears as she shook her head there in the hotel room in San Francisco. No, Jerry. It's too late. Our fine pink flamingo is made of concrete, and I can't carry it any longer. But you let me have it, and I'll find a place to put it down.

This was the square, in the centre of town. I turned right at the corner, and walked along the south side of it, facing the entrance to the courthouse where sparrows fluttered about the eaves. How many thousand times had she stepped along this walk, on Monday mornings and Saturday nights and the white noons of southern Augusts? The doorway was between Barton's Jewellery Store and the Esquire Shop. I went up the stairs where the slender heels had tapped, and turned right in the corridor at the top. The etched glass of the doorway bore the gold-leaf legend: CHAPMAN ENTERPRISES. I pushed it open and went in.

The brown-haired woman in the ante-room looked up pleasantly, and asked, 'Yes, sir. May I help you?'

The inner door was closed. I crossed to it and pushed it open. Mrs. English was watching me with a puzzled frown. 'I beg your pardon,' she said. 'Where you looking for someone?'

There were the three desks, and the safe, and the water cooler, and all the steel filing cabinets, and to the right the two windows looking out into the square. At the third desk, near the door going into his private office, a brown-eyed girl with a little dusting of freckles across her nose was busy at her typewriter. She looked up questioningly.

The large desk in the centre was hers. I crossed to it, and touched it with my hands. Barbara Cullen had quit typing now, and was staring at me, and I was aware that Mrs. English had got up and was standing in the doorway.

'Could I help you?' Barbara Cullen asked.

In the slow unfolding of horror I seemed to be standing outside myself, watching what I was doing but without any power to control or change a movement of it. I might still get away, if I ran now without opening

my mouth, but there didn't seem to be anything I could do about it. I stood there, merely feeling the desk with my hands. Then I crossed the room to Chapman's office, and went inside. Opening the centre drawer of his desk, I lifted out the pencil drawer and turned it upside down to stare at the little card that was taped to the bottom of it.

Right to thirty-two, left two turns to nineteen—

Both girls were in the doorway behind me. They gasped, and when I turned they looked frightened and started to back away.

'Who are you?' Barbara Cullen asked nervously. 'What do you want here?'

I went back to the large desk in the centre of the room and stood behind it, looking out at the square. Mrs. English retreated to the ante-room. Barbara stood as far away as she could, staring at me. The silence stretched out and tightened across the room.

I gripped the edge of the desk. *God, there must be something left of her, somewhere.* She'd sat here for six years, with her bag in that lower left-hand drawer, touching this, putting papers in that basket, picking up the phone— She'd sat here, where I was standing now, and when she glanced up she looked out that window at spring sunlight and the slow eddying of traffic in winter rains and high-school football rallies and funeral processions and the blue October sky.

I stared down at the whitening knuckles of my hands. 'Barbara', I said, 'it wasn't her fault. You've got to believe it. Some way, I've got to make them understand—'

She cried out. I looked up then, and her eyes were widening with horror. 'How did you know my name?' she asked. But it wasn't that. It was the voice; she'd already recognized it.

‘Sit down, Barbara,’ I said. ‘I won’t hurt you. But I’ve got to tell somebody. I can’t stand it any longer. I can’t let her go on lying there taking all the blame, when it was my fault. I could have saved her. She couldn’t help herself——’

I heard Mrs. English dialling, out in the ante-room, but I went on talking, faster now, the words becoming a flood. All that time in Mexico hadn’t meant a thing; you never whipped it or drove it away. You merely drove it underground, into your subconscious, where it could fester beyond your reach.

When the men came up the stairs and into the room behind me I was still talking, and Barbara was listening, but the look of horror on her face was giving way to something else. Maybe it was pity.